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Cover by ROBERT GIBSON JONES
"THE MONSTER FROM MARS"

THRILLING S-F ADVENTURES, is published quarterly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y. 11364 at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (4 issues) U.S. and possessions: $1.65; Canada and Pan American Union Countries: $2.00; all other countries: $2.50.

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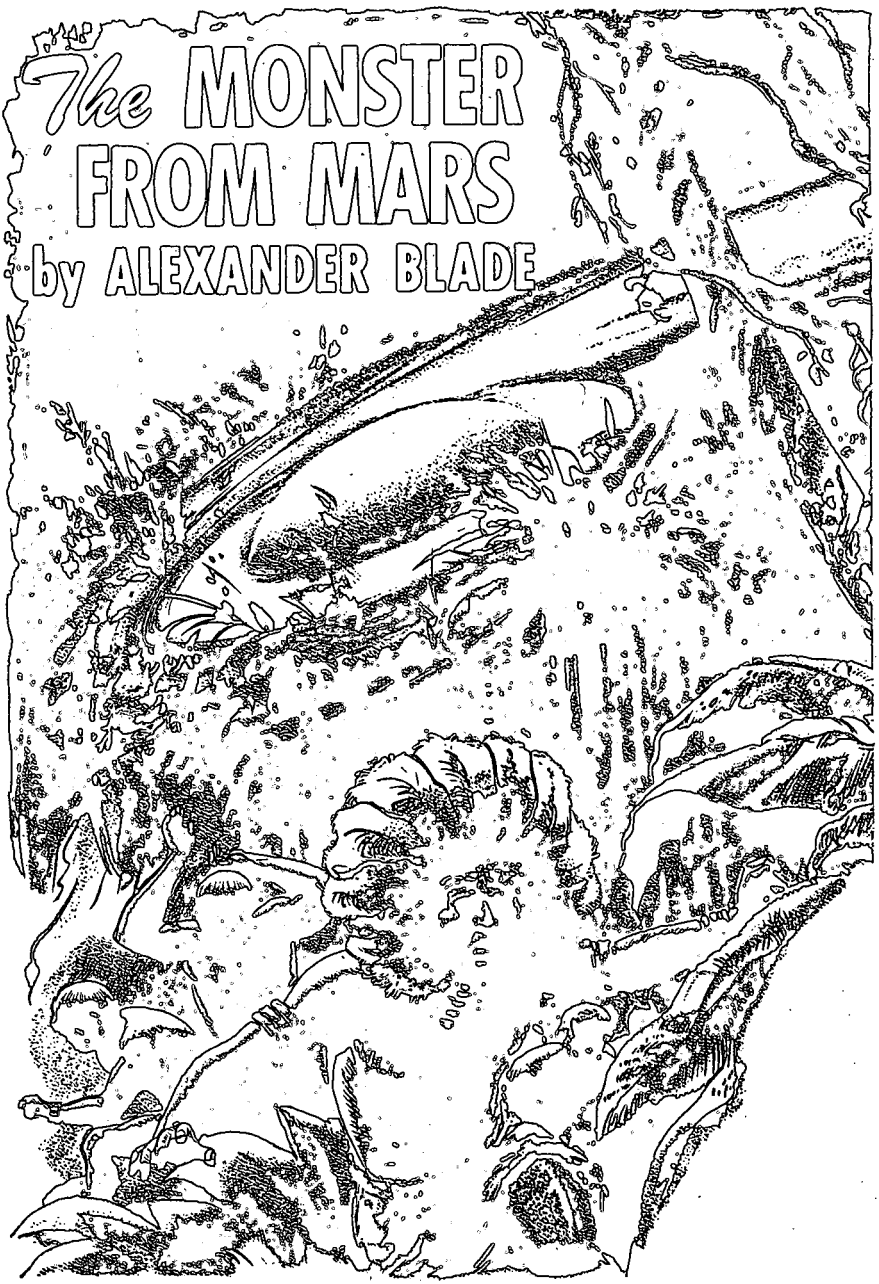

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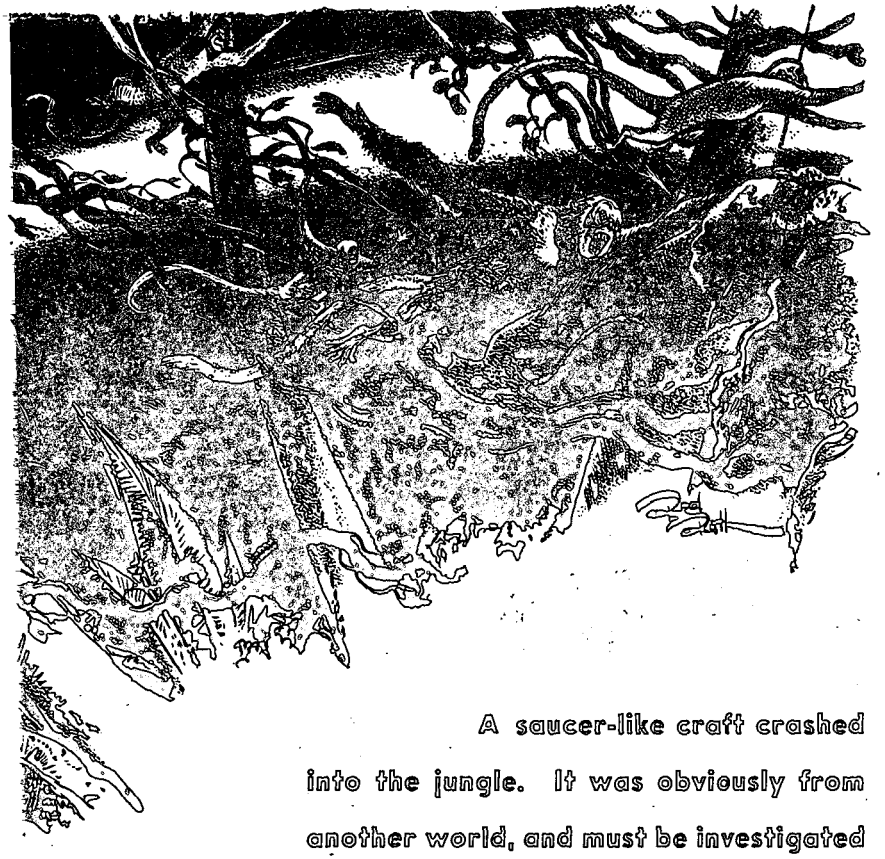

A saucer-like craft crashed into the jungle. It was obviously from another world, and must be investigated

THE vast shape of it seemed to blot the sun from the sky. It swept in low over the horizon and swooped down onto the tree-lined jungleland. For an instant it appeared as if it would clear the last barrier of jungle giants and reach its goal, a wide stretch of grassland, but at the last it pancaked into the fringe of border trees.

There was a dull crash of falling timber, then silence. Only the frightened squawks of birds answered the sound of the crash.

Pedro Argentes stepped slowly from the protection of the tree and peered through bright, frightened eyes toward the near foreground. Behind him the muddy river wound through the swampland. Forgotten was the fish he was going to spear, forgotten the spear. It hung from limp fingers. Pedro had eyes only for the half-seen shape of the monstrous metal thing there in the trees just off the clearing.

It was silent as before, yet somehow more menacing because this menace he couldn't see could be felt. A horror born of his surroundings and superstition made him draw back behind the tree again.

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His eyes were trained to see behind shadows, to discern the real from the fancied. There were odd markings on the great circular thing which looked like a giant shiny *frijole*. He could see that part which lay among the trees but he could not see beyond. At last curiosity overcame some of the fear and he moved forward toward it. He was still some hundreds of feet from it when he became aware of the fact that those markings were doors or windows. And the instant he came aware of it he also realized something else. That there were people. . . . He gulped in horror and turning, dropped his spear and fled from the spot as though pursued by the devil. . . .

* * *

Frederick Ward shifted the glasses higher on his thin-bridged nose with a nicotine-stained finger, looked down at the two people seated across from him and said:

". . . So there it is. A story told by a frightened native, one Pedro Argentes. A flying saucer story not from the West. More, a fantasy of spiders huge as lions or crocodiles. What do you say to that?"

Merrit Hyland looked to his companion, grinned and said:

"What is there to say, that there is more, Horatio. . . . The facts are these. To wit, a native had too much pulque, saw visions of things only drink can bring and brought the tale to his village. . . ."

"Now just a minute, Mer," Gloria Grahame broke in. "Those are suppositions, not facts. The facts are that other natives of this same village went out, saw them also and reported the truth of these monsters."

"There are some who swear for the authenticity of the Loch Ness monster," Hyland put in sourly. "Let's not be childish about this."

"Children. Children!" Ward cautioned. "Let's get back to why I've called you in. You, Hyland, are going down to Campeche in Mexico to do some research. These reports emanate from there. Spiders are surely down your alley. It was just my thought that since you were going down there, you ought to take a look-see in on this."

Merrit Hyland placed his elbows on the desk, made an arch of his fingers and looked up through narrowed eyes at the man opposite. His rugged features were screwed up in a scowl.

"And let me tell you something, Ward," he said fiercely. "You might be the Lord Potentate in this foundation, but if you think I'm going down there and waste time on this foolishness you've got another think coming."

WARD sighed windily and came forward around the desk. He stood before the other and shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I suppose I have to break a confidence and show you proof," he said. He reached behind him and pressed a buzzer on the desk. In a moment Ward's assistant came in. Ward whispered something to the man, who then left. In a short while he returned with a package.

Ward opened the wrappings and brought to light for their startled eyes a human arm. The man and woman were versed enough in anatomy to see that the arm had been torn from its socket. There were terrible lengths of scar tissue running down the forearm, as though huge teeth had chewed at it.

"Take a look at that," Ward said.

Hyland shook his head in disbelief.

"Understand?" Ward asked. "I too have never seen teeth marks like those. So I took micro-photos of the bite of a spider's mandible. They match these. . . ."

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Hyland still doubted. "Do you mean to say that a spider tore that arm from some poor devil? Why—why he might have fallen into the river and had a crocodile grab him. . . ."

Ward threw both arms outward in a gesture of resignation.

"There is the scientific mind," he said. "Steeped in fact, without imagination. And I thought you were different, Merrit. That's why I wanted you to have the crack at it. Okay. I was going out there anyway. But I've got this conference coming up and won't be able to get away for at least three days. I'll manage alone. Thanks anyway. . . ."

"Wa—it a minute, Fred," Hyland snarled. "That's what I love about you. The original jumper-at-conclusions. Have it your way. So I'll look in on this village and see what they have to offer. But what about Gloria here?"

"Miss Grahame can talk for herself, thank you," Gloria Grahame said in deliberately sweet tones. "I'll be glad to go along. After all, what would you do without me? There *are* times when you *don't* know what hour of the day it is. Besides, if we do find something you'll want an amenuensis along."

"No! Absolutely and positively, no!" Hyland turned a flushed face to her.

"Yes, dream-man. Yes. And why not? You were taking me on this buggy expedition anyway. What's changed your mind, the bit of cadaver?"

Hyland grunted an unintelligible something, then held his silence. The truth of the matter was he had been greatly disturbed by what he had seen. Yet he could not bring himself to believe it. It simply had to be a delusion or drunken nightmare.

"Okay," Hyland said. "Come along then. . . ."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Gloria said. Her eyes said something

Merrit Hyland

Hyland couldn't read. He wouldn't have understood it anyway.

"Very well, then," Ward said, obviously pleased by the turn of events. "There will be no change in your plans, Hyland. Only try and do some sort of investigat . . ."

"I said I would," Hyland broke in.

"Good. I'll be seeing you, then. . . ."

"HOW long do you think it will take, Moas?" Reet asked.

"Hard to say," Moas said. "I'll keep trying. Of one thing we can be sure, they saw us fall."

"Blasted engine!" Reet grunted. His eyes, a foot in diameter, moved slowly from side to side. Only Moas knew the intricacies of the complicated engine and Moas had assured him the

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delay was only temporary. All this was well but they had a mission to perform. There weren't enough of them to accomplish any real good. That was why he had been sent down, to reconnoiter. . . .

"Have we taken any more of these odd creatures?" Moas asked. Two of his forelegs were busy in a delicate adjustment of a balance.

"It seems they're good only for food," Reet said. "It is obvious they are of low intelligence. . . ."

"H'm. Well, perhaps the scouts will bring some of higher intelligence."

"Small chance," Reet said.

The small monoplane circled lower and lower until it barely cleared the treetops. Gloria Grahame peered searchingly through the window on her side and said:

"We can't be too far, Mer. I thought I spotted the river a short while ago. Wait. . . . Down there. See. . . . Now we've passed it. But I saw a flash of light as if it were reflected from something metallic."

Hyland's brow was corrugated in a frown. His eyes were slitted in concentration. He too had thought he had seen the same flash of light and from the same spot Gloria had pointed out. He circled the plane still lower trying to bring it as close to the scene as possible. Now they were grazing the topmost branches.

It happened with the suddenness of a striking adder. A slender tube-like tentacle shot out from the midst of the branches and fastened itself to the landing gear and pulled it down. They fell with the speed of a plunging elevator.

Gloria would have dashed her brains out on the instrument panel if it hadn't been for Merrit's protective arm. As is was they were badly shaken up. Seconds passed like the hours of doom. They were in a world of twilight. All about them was the jungle, green gloom, terrible and terroristic. Suddenly Gloria screamed, a horrible sound of terror mounting until the whole cabin echoed with it. Merrit whipped toward her, then turned his glance to where her wide-staring eyes were set in a hypnotized stare.

Some twenty feet ahead of the plane's nose was the most horrible thing he'd ever seen. A monstrous hairy shape was crawling toward them on legs which were like fuzzy-tipped timbers. The thing had a face, if one could call it that; at least there were a pair of eyes, great saucer-like things set on each side of a parrot beak and below it mandibles like great crushers of bone. It was a spider, but such as Hyland could not believe existed except in the imagination of science-fiction writers.

"Mer! *Mer*. . . . Do something. . . ." Gloria moaned and buried her face in her hands.

HYLAND had the quick perception of a trained scientist. His senses had taken in many things in the short time he had before his fingers flew to the starting switch. He had seen that they had been dragged into a gigantic spider web whose lines were like the rope hawsers of a battleship. The plane was fairly enmeshed in the web. But somehow the nose and propeller were free of the tentacles of gooy substance.

Then Hyland switched the motor on. It seemed as though years went by, and in that time the spider was within a foot of the plane. The roar of the motor's starting was like the call to dinner for a hungry farm hand. The prop turned slowly, then with accelerating speed until it was a blur before their eyes. And in another instant the spiders two forelegs reached forward

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to rip through the glass.

They heard the sound of the thing even above the roar of the motor. It was like a wild, human scream of pain. And like something human it lifted the two forepaws or legs with which it had been about to embrace the plane's nose. The propeller had done devastating work. Either the spider hadn't seen or understood what those blades were. But it had struck the two legs directly into the path of their whirling circle and the blade had sliced them neatly in two.

Still screaming terribly, the creature backed up until it was out of sight.

"Glo. Quick! Out of here. . . ."

She seemed paralyzed from fright. Merrit undid her belt and lifted her bodily from her seat. It wasn't until he had dragged her to the door that she realized the spider had gone. She snapped out of her stupor then. There was a patterned arrangement of vine creepers almost at the door. Gloria started to reach for one of the thick strands, but stopped with her hand outstretched at Merrit's shout of warning:

"Don't! That's the spider's web!"

She jerked back as though the thing was ablaze and clung to Merrit like a leech. He had taken the situation in at a glance. The instant the immense insect had caught his prey he had begun to spin the web. In the few moments of drama the web was almost complete. But because of what had happened the spider hadn't quite time to finish his spinning. There was a shallow opening between the branches. Merrit and the girl scrambled through that opening.

Merrit's brain was hitting on all cylinders. The spider had been badly hurt but not mortally. It would soon be back. It was very probable also, that it would bring others. They had to get out of this particular neighborhood, but fast.

Gloria Grahame

The ground they landed on was soft, spongy, typical jungle marshland. The brush was thick with bush and creeper. Flowers grew in thick profusion and perfumed the air to a sticky sweetness. But Merrit had neither ear for the wondrous sound of birds, or nose for the odors of tropic flowers. He saw, weighed, and appraised their chances of escape by the reality of physical barriers, trees, vines, land and water.

He had taken a mental fix of their position at the very instant of their entanglement in the web. To the northwest some hundred miles was the lowland of Tobassco, to the southeast the state of Campeche. Though the distance to Villa Hermosa, the nearest town was at least fifty miles off, and though there probably were villages closer, the villages would have to be in

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the heart of the jungle. They had some ten miles to go in the direction of Villa Hermosa and they would be out of the jungle. It was the only direction which would provide some safety.

ABOVE them the roar of the motor was being accompanied by other sounds, ripping tearing ones. The vibration was tearing the plane loose from its prison. Merrit grabbed Gloria's wrist and started off at a slithering run through the muck. They hadn't gone more than a hundred yards when there was a terrific explosion and a sheet of flame burst from the spot they had just quitted. Merrit had been right in his supposition.

Their single thought had been one of escape. In the cabin of the small plane were two instruments of indispensable use in the jungle, machetes. Both, man and woman, had guns in the holsters strapped to their belts and clips of ammunition in their pockets. But Merritt had an idea it was going to take more power than their pistols possessed to stop these insect giants should they meet again.

Merrit was keen-eyed, sure-footed from the years of jungle work. But the girl was a hindrance. She slipped in the muck, somehow always managing to find the thorniest creeper in which to entangle herself, the slimiest mud in which to slip, the lowest branches into which to stumble. Their progress was slow, painful, creeping. And if all that wasn't bad enough, the thought of the terror which might be hard on their heels rode, a horror on their brain.

How long they ran and how far they'd gone before Gloria gasped: "Mer. Please . . . Wait-a-minute. I'm fagged," they had no idea. Merrit looked behind him, saw and heard nothing, and placing his hand on his knees bent and gulped in air. The girl leaned against the bole of a jungle giant, her head hanging low, almost against her chest, breathed in long, slow gasps.

After a few seconds in which he recovered his breath, Merrit stepped to her side and said:

"I'm sorry, kid. But we can't take a chance and rest too long. I know this is going to be tough on you but we've simply got to get out of here. . . ."

Gloria Grahame was a woman, a glorious creature of beautiful proportions and lovely face topped by a wealth of hair the color of molten gold. At this moment she looked like a witch out of a production of Hansel and Gretel. Mud had caked on her forehead and right cheek. Her once-white breeches were slime-covered and slivers of cloth flapped disconsolately along one thigh. A thorn had caught her blouse and ripped it almost from her body and her bosom was bared almost completely. Her hair was in disarray and lay in wild profusion of curls about her face. At that moment Merrit decided she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Some instinct, however, told him not to say anything about it. Instead, he went to her, placed his arms about her shoulders and said in gentle tones:

"I'm sorry, honey, that this had to happen. . . ."

From some inner core of courage, from some fount of fight she hadn't thought she possessed, Gloria drew sustenance.

"Don't be sorry, baby. I was frightened before. Now, I'm tired as heck, and dirty as an urchin, but full of the old fight. As you say, let's get out of here. . . ."

Again Merrit led the way.

IT HAD been fairly late in the afternoon when they had been entrapped. The sun, fighting to get through the

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tangled and thick foliage was waging a losing battle now. The green gloom was darkening to black shadow and deeper darkness without shadow. Merrit had several worries now. He had to get out of the open. For one thing, this was malaria country. Back there in the plane in the small case he had brought along for such an emergency, lay the case with the tiny capsules of anti-malaria toxin. Even he, with many years of living in the jungle behind him, knew the treachery of sleeping in the open. There were a million biting insects which came out at night and would find the warmth of human flesh an inviting sanctuary. Worse, though much more rare, was the wild beast, a jaguar, or the snake. . . . No. They had to find shelter.

It was a race against the inexorable darkness and its accompanying terror. They won out in the short twilight of the jungle. As it was, it was only the merest chance that Merrit, using his faculties to the fullest, first smelled then saw the tiny jungle village.

The village consisted of a dozen straw-thatched huts, a common compound and several canoes drawn up the muddy shore of the river which cut across one end of the village. But of life there was nothing.

"Oh, Lord!" Gloria gasped as they peered from behind the shelter of the brush fringing the village. "What is that horrible odor?"

"Decaying flesh," Merrit said softly. "Probably human. Well, the place looks deserted. Might as well see what there is to be seen."

The village was not alone a place of refuge; it was also an oasis of light. The moon was brilliant, giving a light that was as good visually as sunlight without the brightness. Merrit moved from one hut to another until the last had been investigated. As he had suspected when first he saw the place, it was deserted, though why was a mystery. Whatever the reason, it had been one which caused a precipitous rout. Primitive stoves and fireplaces still bore pots in which beans and corn had once simmered. In one hut, the most luxurious; it bore a table made of wood-crating, there were plates of food still on the table. The same reason for the exodus came to both simultaneously.

Frederick Ward

"The spiders! They must have come," Gloria said.

"The spiders," Merrit echoed. "Yes. They came all right. H'm. I don't like that. They might come back."

"Uh, uh," Gloria said. "I have a feeling they won't. This food is at least a day old. . . ."

"And," Merrit broke in from the fireplace where he had gone to look at

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the ashes, "these ashes are perhaps older. I think it's safe enough to stay the night. Now let's find a place to stay."

There were sleeping mats in a corner of the single room. Hyland took one and gave another to the girl with the admonition, "Watch for bugs."

She laughed and he was quick to note that the laugh was natural in sound and not forced.

"At least they'll be the small kind," she said.

"Good night," he called from the opposite corner.

She mumbled something and he arose and walked to her side. She was looking up at him. On her lips was a smile of infinite sweetness. He found it the most natural thing in the world to do; kiss her. Straightening, he went back to his mat. And when he called a second, "Good night," her answer had a "Darling" at the end of it.

FREDERICK WARD slapped fretfully at his perspiring brow with a kerchief which had once been fresh and white but was neither. Damp spots made large dark circles under his armpits. He held a map in one hand while he gestured with his free arm.

"Now look, Harrison," Ward said. "They must be in this region here. There is no word of them from Balancan or from Felipe. We know they left Villa Hermosa two days ago. We'll simply have to fly back and forth above this region in ever-increasing narrower circles until we spot either the plane or its wreckage."

"With the helicopter," Harrison, Ward's assistant, said, "it will make the whole business a lot easier than with another plane. How long before they gas the ship up?"

"Another hour," Ward replied.

Harrison looked up at the cloudless blue.

"Good. We ought to have a minimum of nine more hours of light. We'll need it too. The moment shadows lengthen out here, observation becomes impossible."

They both turned at the sound of a shouting voice from the direction of the Villa Hermosa airport. Their ship was ready for take-off. . . .

Merrit Hyland awoke to the odor of cooking food. He sniffed appreciatively and rolled over and sat erect.

"Aah!" he said, smacking his lips loudly. "The lady knows how to cook."

"And many other things," Gloria said from the direction of the fireplace. She turned an impish look in his direction and wrinkled her nose at him. He stepped to her side.

"*Frijoles*, eh?" he asked.

"Well, don't sound so disappointed. After all, ham and eggs would be a bit hard to get; that is until I get next to the village grocer."

"He'd better not be good-looking," Merrit said.

"Jealous already," she said. "And here we're not even married."

"I'm going to remedy that soon as we get out of this pest-hole," Merrit said.

A silence developed as an aftermath to his words. Not until they had swallowed the last of the *frijoles* and drank the water she had boiled, did they speak again.

"I guess we'd better be on our way," she said.

His eyes had been narrowed in concentration. He nodded his head several times at something he'd been thinking and said:

"I think I'll take a look at that thing out there."

She followed the line of his pointing finger which was directed out the door-

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way and saw that at the far edge of the village, on the very edge of the shore, there was a heap of something. That the something was dead was apparent. The wind was now from that direction and she felt nauseated from the odor coming toward them.

"I'll go along," she said in a steady voice.

"Might be a messy thing to look at," he cautioned.

"After yesterday's horror, I'm going to write Boris Karloff letters of derision," she said, and grinned up at him.

IT WAS the carcass of an immense monstrosity. The thing was covered by millions of insects winged and crawling. Maggots swarmed in an unholy feast upon it. Merrit suddenly threw his right arm outward as a barrier against her further progress. He had seen a long, dark shape that could only mean one thing, jaguar, digging among the crawling vermin.

The wind must have shifted because suddenly a wedge-shaped head lifted and turned in their direction. The growl of the animal came distinctly to them.

"Merrit! Let's go back," Gloria said, grasping Hyland firmly by his forearm.

The look of speculation in the man's eyes hardened to conviction as his hand slid down to the strapped holster. He slipped the catch and pulled the heavy-calibered pistol from its pocket.

"I think he'll run," Merrit Hyland said. "I'm not going to try to hit him. Just whistle one past his nose. If he's heard a gun before he'll high tail it for cover."

The gun roared and jumped in his hand. There was an answering roar from the jaguar, but though it was a sound of rage, the animal only lifted its voice once more and slunk off to the jungle.

Harrison

"Thank the Lord he wasn't hungry. If he hadn't feasted or was still hungry," Merrit said, "we'd have had trouble."

The odor of corruption was overpowering in its intensity. They had to stand and look from several feet away, so nauseating was it. The shape was indefinable but huge. It might have been one of many things, but that it wasn't a human, Merrit knew. The carcass was swollen to many times its original size of course. And with every passing second it was becoming less and less a shape, just a *thing*. . . .

"Look!" Merrit said, pointing to several objects near it. "Spears! And there. . . ."

"Bones. Legs, arms," Gloria said and repressed a convulsive shudder.

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"I think I get the picture," Merrit said. "It came to the village and caught several of its inhabitants. Most of the others ran from it but there were some who stayed and fought it. That's where the spears come in. They fought it and killed it. But in the terror and fear that this horrible thing had others of its like near, they ran also. Hang it! I wish we'd come sooner. I'd have liked a close examination of the thing."

And, as though in answer, Gloria's voice rose in a scream that had had its counterpart in the cabin of their plane. More it was for the same reason. Merrit whirled and saw where her terror was born in.

LUMBERING toward them on its six legs, was the largest spider Merrit ever saw or wanted to see. It stood ten feet high and the top joint of its legs rose another foot above the furry head. The weight of it must have been tremendous because for all of its legs, it wasn't coming very fast. Two antenna-like projections waved back and forth toward each other from either side of and just above the saucer-shaped eyes. Merrit would have sworn the sound he heard did not come from the creature's mouth, when he heard:

"Do not run! There is nothing to fear. . . ."

Maybe there isn't, Merrit thought as he turned and grabbed Gloria's arm and started for the cool, green depths of the jungle, but I'm not staying to find out. He turned for a last look, and redoubled his speed. A slender string of waxy stuff had shot out from the spider, like the line from a fishing reel, and was falling toward them in a short arc. Had he and the girl delayed for a single second, they would have been trapped in the first strand of the web.

The jungle enfolded them in its embrace. But though they used all their strength in just running, their efforts seemed to no avail. The spider had more legs and better means of travel. For all its weight it could use the trees as stepping stones. And once more the slime and tangled underbrush sapped the strength of the two humans as it had done the afternoon before.

"I'm beat out," Gloria gasped after a while. She stumbled as she said it, and Merrit had to grab her quickly before she fell.

His teeth sank into his lower lip and drew blood so sharply did he bite. There had to be a way of getting out of this, he thought. There were crashing sounds behind him, and shouted words. He lifted his head and listened.

"Hoab! Sanor! Gaitha! This way. . . ."

HE TURNED this way and that trying to find a way out. He whirled toward a sudden movement in the brush close by, whipped out his gun and blazed away at the sound. Before their startled eyes a jaguar broke and ran past them. Merrit's mind worked with the speed of light.

"Quick, honey," he bent and whispered to the girl. "Under this bush."

He dragged her forward toward it and nestled by her side. They weren't an instant too soon.

From a direction at right angles to the path they had been following came another of the spiders, and from ahead came a shout:

"In the web, Gaitha. A prisoner."

The spider lumbered toward the hidden voice and following it came another but this one from the same direction the humans had come from. This one lumbered off after its counterpart.

Gloria started to speak but Merrit placed a cautioning finger against her

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lips. He removed it after a second and used his hands in sign talk. Placing the tip of his index finger to his lips first, then to his ears, he shook his head as though saying they could not hear. Then putting it against his nose he shook his head to show the creatures had no sense of smell. Then pointing to himself and the girl, he placed his finger against his lips in a sign that they should hold silence.

Suddenly from ahead came a series of wild roars. Mixed with it were other sounds, screams and sounds of rage or pain. For a few seconds the cacophony of sound came to them, then silence descended on the jungle.

They waited as patiently as they could, straining their ears for some sign to show either the coming or departure of the things, but all they heard were the calls of birds, and the buzzing sounds of winged insects. But though Gloria tired soon of their cramped position, Merrit held her close until he thought they could venture forth with some degree of safety.

And even with their first steps, Merrit brought his head close and whispered in low tones:

"Step carefully. Make for the river bank. Somewhere along its length we should find another village."

Merrit had not lost his sense of direction. Moving carefully, he and the girl edged along a faintly etched trail toward the water. Nor was he wrong. It wasn't more than a few minutes later that they reached the muddy, curving banks. But here they were faced with a new terror. Literally millions of mosquitos and winged insects attacked them. There was nothing they could do but bow their heads, hold their arms close to their faces and trot along. Soon they began to show the effects of the insect bites. Their faces swelled in dozens of places until they looked as though they had broken out in aggravated cases of mumps.

In the depths of the forest all had been cool, though damply so. Here, the sun struck the water and reflected in a thousand terrible rays of heat. Unprotected as they were by helmets, the heat soon began to take effect. Merrit kept a close watch on Gloria. She was the weak one. He held her hand, hot and damp with heat and perspiration. Suddenly it went limp and Merrit knew she had about reached the limit of her endurance. His arm went around her and half-carrying, half-lifting her, he managed to stagger toward the green depths of a sheltered nook not far from the edge of the water.

There were several strands of grey-green fibrous branches athwart their path. They looked like streamers sent from the trees. Merrit threw out an arm to cast the nearest aside. Too late to save himself, he realized that these streamers were not floating branches. They were the strands of the web the giant spiders wove. And he and Gloria were now prisoners. They had been outwitted. Nor was their fate far from them. Ahead, coming from the tangled depths of the tree from which the web was being woven, came crawling the terror they had tried so hard to escape. . . .

"HOW goes it now, Moas?" Reet asked.

"As badly as before," the chief engineer said. "I have come to the conclusion that we are stranded. . . ."

Reet's antennae, the means of their communication waved about like the frightened wings of a moth. Sounds which were transposed into words came to the receiving end of Moas' antennae:

"Blast it! Blast it to the devils in Grob's pit! They can't have lost trace of us. . . ."

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"They haven't. But we have," Moas said. "I mean by that, that though they know where we are, they might not be able to get to us. Unless, of course, the Most High evolves a means."

"I don't understand," Reet said. "We had always managed before."

"It has to do with the atmospheric density. The proportions are different here. Yet the density on the surface of this planet is ideal for our life. Which reminds me. What of these strange beings the scouts have reported finding? Is it true they have a means of flight? Surely then, they have a superior intelligence than those which we have found previously?"

"They have. Their very speech shows it by its complexity and choice of vocabulary. I have ordered they be taken prisoner. If they do not prove to be amenable to our suggestions, we shall have food at least."

"Have any other of our scouts run into the kind of trouble Hutu found?" Moas asked.

"No, blast them!" Reet was infuriated at the thought. "If we could but rise above this land I would blast them from the face of this planet."

"I think the Most High might have such plans, that is if a general landing proves feasible. Of course, being out of communication with the mother ship,

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we can only speculate about their activities."

Suddenly Reet's antennae stood stiffly erect away from his head. Moas knew that he was receiving messages from the scouts sent out a while before. He waited patiently for the messages to come to an end.

"They have captured the two," Reet said exultantly. "It shouldn't be long and we can see and hear these odd creatures."

"Good! Do not forget to call me," Moas said.

"Don't worry about that," Reet said. "You just get the engine to function. . . ."

"WE DON'T have too much time left, sir," Harrison said.

Frederick Ward looked at the sky, peering through eyes slitted against the still strong light of the dying sun and said:

"Still two hours. Hang it! They just couldn't have disappeared as though in a void. Surely there must be some trace, some small part of their plane. . . . H'mm! Harrison!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Set the 'copter down there. At the edge of the jungle near those twin plantains. . . ."

The helicopter landed with the smoothness of its kind, without a jar

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to disturb in the slightest, the equilibrium of its passengers. The cabin door opened and Ward alighted. Sticking his head back in he said:

"Break out those high-powered carbines we brought. Also the machetes. Don't forget the anti-malaria toxin."

He backed away as his assistant came through after him. Ward and Harrison made sure their pistols were ready for instant action, threw the carbines over their shoulders by the slings, took up the machetes, and started hacking their way into the jungle.

"If you don't mind my asking, sir," Harrison said as he followed the other, "why did you want me to land here?"

"There is a village I want to look at," Ward replied. "I saw something strange about it from the air. Thank goodness we were able to hover over it. I think you were looking at something else at the time, but I saw a heap of something on the ground which interested me. From the air I'd swear that peculiar shape was the skeleton form of a gigantic spider."

Harrison gave his superior a peculiar look of disapproval. Gigantic spiders! Harrison knew Ward was probably the world's most famous entomologist. But spiders the size of elephants. Shades of Jonathan Swift! Still shaking his head at the foolishness of the other, Harrison continued to follow.

It took them perhaps ten minutes of work to reach the village. Before venturing into it they slung the carbines down for instant use if necessary.

"I'll go first," Ward said. "You cover me. Shoot at the first sign of anything suspicious."

"Right, sir."

Ward stalked straight down the center of the village. Behind him, Harrison ran from hut to hut, always managing to keep the other in sight. At last Ward reached the area where he had spotted the skeleton. Turning, he waved for Harrison to come up. Together, they stood and looked at the thing.

"See," Ward said pointing. "Those forelegs. Four of them. Walking legs. And the rear ones; they are spinning legs. But of bone. And look at the skull, bony, large, with brain capacity. These creatures have the wherewithal to think. The thing must have been ten feet high with a spread of perhaps twenty feet between its legs. Unbelievable. . . ."

The dying rays of the sun struck a sliver of glittering light from something on the ground. Ward, still lost in the skeleton of the spider, did not see it. But Harrison did. He stooped and picked the object up.

"Sir! Sir," he shouted excitedly. "Look at this. . . ."

Ward turned and peered down at the object in Harrison's palm. It was an empty cartridge case.

"From one of those new, high-powered automatic pistols, the ones which eject empty shells. Hyland and Miss Grahame must have been here."

"You're right. Of course you're right," Ward said quietly. "Let's go through these huts. Perhaps they left some sign of their visit."

THEY found it in the hut where Hyland and Gloria had spent the night. Gloria had managed to mend her torn blouse as best she could by tearing strips from the torn part and binding her breast with them. She had torn a part of the collar off. It was this part which they found. It was the proof they needed. For on it was a tag which bore the inscription, Marshall Field and Company, Chicago.

"We'll circle the village," Ward said as they came out of the hut. "Hyland and the girl wore boots. These natives

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wear sandals or go bare-footed. The ground is soft and their prints should show up. . . . You go down along the river bank. They might have headed for it thinking to follow it."

But it was Ward who spied the indentations of their boots. He also saw the tracks of something else and instantly identified the markings.

"God!" he whispered hoarsely at sight of the huge, characterless imprints. "One of those things was after them." He called Harrison to his side and the two stood for a second, looking down at the ground.

"See," Harrison said pointing. "They were running. Right into the jungle. . . ."

Ward's lips pressed firmly together. There were but two alternatives. Either go back to the helicopter and fly for help, or go into the jungle after them. Ward made up his mind on the instant.

"All right, Harrison," he said. "I'm going in. Coming?"

"Yes, sir," came the immediate reply.

They lost the tracks the instant they entered the brush. But the path wasn't hard to follow, because, due to the size of the spider, it had ripped through the brush. But after a half hour's tracking Ward and the other came to an impasse. Ahead of them was what looked to be a net of something stretched out directly across their path. There was something hanging in the net.

"Look sir," Harrison pointed. "It's a jaguar, or what's left of him. Those spiders must have laid the net right across the trail and the beast ran straight into it."

"So they're flesh eaters," Ward said. "H'm. Let's stop a second and reason this out. Obviously the spider who was after Merrit and the girl was not the one who spun this web. If he were that swift to be able to get ahead of them, then he was also swift enough to have caught them.

"Now. To reason this out we've got to use all the facts. So we go back to the first fact, that a native saw a circular ship fall from the sky and from it emerged giant spiders. Which fact brings out this conclusion. That the spiders can think and have some means of communication. From this we can deduce that there were more than one of the creatures on the loose. And from there we can assume that the first, spotting Merrit and the girl gave chase, and warned his fellows what had happened. Now I'll wager my life that we will find similar webs hanging to either side of this path. I'll strike off to the right for a short distance and you go left. Five minutes should prove my contention. We'll meet here. . . ."

Ward was proven right.

But Harrison had something else on his mind.

"Maybe we ought to be turning back, sir. I don't think we have too much of daylight left."

Ward thought for a few seconds, then said:

"I guess so. We still have better than an hour. I hate to give up, though, especially when we've found that they're not far off. And worse, that they're in danger. Tell you what. Let's strike off toward the river. Merrit is both clever and quick-witted. Perhaps. . . . Another half hour will still give us time. . . ."

MERRIT whirled and, shoving Gloria ahead of him, started to run. But this time it was too late. The slender coil spun out toward them and encircled them both. Another came down and still another. Somehow, Merrit managed to keep his right hand free. But the girl was bound tightly to him. She smiled up at him and all

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fear was wiped from her face.

He bent and kissed her, quickly and hard.

"Looks like this is it, honey," he said.

There was the slightly metallic sound of the spider's voice calling to his companions:

"I have them."

As though they were at the end of a pulley, Merrit and the girl were drawn upward. By the time they reached the spider they were wrapped as though in a cocoon. Everything but Merrit's right arm.

The huge eyes examined them closely as they came up the web. There was nothing of anything human in their depths. They were cold and expressionless as a pair of stones. There was a flash of motion from two of the spinning legs and the cocoon was cut free. Then, bearing his prisoners aloft, the spider scurried down the web. He waited for his companions. There were three of them.

Their antennae waved wildly in a cross current of talk:

"Good! Reet will be pleased. . . ."

"Yes," said another. "And so will the Most High. . . ."

Their captor exulted:

"Perhaps I will be made one of the Lesser Legion. . . .?"

"Ho, Hutu! Glory will be yours for this."

"Let us return, then," the one called Hutu said.

It was then Merrit acted. His right arm was free. The instant the strand began to entwine about them he had whipped out his pistol. There was but one thing to do. The three companions of Hutu stepped into the lead. Hutu was some twenty feet behind them as they started back to their ship. Perhaps the double load was a little too much for the spider but after a hundred yards, he was fifty feet behind.

Merrit raised the pistol and took careful aim downward at one of the huge eyes and pulled the trigger. A great gush of odorous ooze shot out of the hole which appeared in the spider's head. It was black in color and it drenched the man and girl in its vile flow. Once more the pistol roared and the other eye fountained in black slime.

Hutu collapsed to the ground. But before he did he dropped his precious bundle. The shots brought the other three on the run. They looked at the body of their companion, then began to scurry around looking for Merrit and the girl. The two had fallen into a tangled mess of moss. Before the other spiders got to the scene Merrit had somehow managed to burrow deep into it. He suspected that because of their height the spiders could not see much of what lay on the ground. He was right. But he hadn't planned on their ingeniousness.

The instant they realized their prey was gone, they began a systematic burrowing with their four walking legs. Up and down in narrowing furrows they marched. Back and forth, ever drawing closer to the human cocoon they came. All that was to be seen of the two humans was Merrit's extended arm with the pistol stuck out.

Gloria had been trying desperately to free herself of the slimy coil. She had to give up with a moan of despair.

"I can't. It's so sticky, Mer," she whispered.

"I know. I tried before. Looks like this is really it. The way they're going about it, it won't take more than a couple of minutes before they find us."

BUT Merrit was wrong. It seemed impossible that thorough as they were, that they should pass them by. But time and time again, sometimes when they were right on top of the

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two, but always something either distracted them, or the marching feet just missed. If there was one thing they possessed, it was patience. Time went by sluggishly. The forest grew dark and still the spiders marched their patrol. All movement had died in Merrit. Now and then he would flex his fingers slightly. If circulation stopped in that arm Merrit knew nothing could help them.

All would have been well had not one of the spiders kicked against the bundle deep in the brush. The silence was shattered then by the roaring sound of Merrit's gun. Once, twice, and twice again it went off and each time he fired there was a roar of pain from one or another of the spiders. But he wasn't as lucky as he had been with Hutu.

Either his aim was bad or the time he had lain there had closed circulation enough to make firing difficult, but whatever the reason, Merrit didn't hit a spot to bring death to them.

Save one shell, Merrit thought as he counted the shots. Two. One for her and one for me. Six, he counted, then turned, and looked down at the girl. She read what was on his mind.

"Love came a little late, didn't it, dearest?" she said.

"I was blind," he said.

"It doesn't matter now," she said, smiled, closed her eyes and said, "All right, sweetheart."

He bent his wrist inward toward her breast, breathed a silent prayer and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened but an empty clicking sound. Merrit had forgotten the two shots he had used in the forest.

"There are no more shells," he said with something akin to panic in his voice.

The girl looked past his shoulder.

"Oh, Mer, honey. They're coming again."

The spiders had retreated from the hail of fire. Now, they came forward again. Straight for the bundle on the ground. The sound of their mandibles working was the most terrible the two humans had ever heard. Closer and closer and at last directly above them. They closed their eyes and waited.

There was an interval of silence, as though the whole forest awaited the end of the tragedy. The end was unexpected.

Instead of the crushing sound of the mandibles closing on their defenseless bodies, Merrit and the girl heard the spanging sound of high-powered rifle fire. And once more there were the loud shrieks of pain from the spiders. The rifle fire was steady and continuous for several seconds. When it was over silence descended on the jungle again.

"Ward! Ward," Merrit shouted. "Here, man. . . ."

Gloria sank into a quivering crying bundle on the ground at her release. Merrit knelt at her side, placed his arms about her and comforted her as best he could. Ward and Harrison stood above them and marveled that they had found them. They had, in fact, started on their way back to the helicopter when they heard the shots. Orienting themselves, they dashed wildly in the direction of the firing. They arrived in the nick of time.

"Do you think. . . . But you both have to manage it somehow," Ward broke in on the tableau. "Another twenty minutes and we won't be able to see our hands in front of our faces. Let's go."

MERRIT and Harrison supported Gloria. Stumbling in a wild run, the four raced for the spot where Ward and Harrison had the helicopter. Through the deserted village, past the mouldering carcass of the spider, into

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the jungle again, they ran. But the shadows were falling fast, faster than they could run. The ascending moon was already casting its own shadows. And still they ran on. For in their breasts was a common fear. That they hadn't seen the last of the spiders and that there might be others lurking in the jungle paths.

They were drenched with perspiration, winded and staggering when they reached the open and saw the silver shape of the helicopter ahead of them. Gloria was crying with gladness when she saw it.

"Let's take it easy for a second," Merrit gasped. "I'm just about done in."

It wasn't Merrit's word which gave them pause. It was a droning sound from above. They looked up and saw an immense circular shape above them. Streamers of flame swept from exhausts strung along the hull of the strange ship. It moved silently in the heavens, a saucer-like plane. They watched it swing toward the eastern horizon and disappear from sight.

"What was it?" Gloria asked fearfully.

They did not answer her but looked fearfully at each other. . . .

THE mother ship seemed to hang suspended from the sky. Suddenly a string of cables shot out from it. And in a few seconds a number of creatures began to descend.

They reached the ground, formed into two squads, and with the largest of them at their head, marched off toward the huge circular shape not far off. Reaching it, they clambered aboard and disappeared into an open port on the topside.

Reet and the balance of his crew were lined up at attention. Their antennaes stood erect as if in salute. The squads deployed to form lines opposite those awaiting them. The immense spider marched to the center and turned his grotesque body to face Reet and the others.

"Moas is an excellent mechanic," the monster said.

"It is true, Most High," Reet said.

"A better mechanic than you are a commander, Reet," the Most High said. "I have full details of what transpired here. My engineers tell me that this planet has a sufficiency of what we need to carry on our lives here. We left Roas because it was a dying planet. . . ."

Reet's cold, unemotional eyes watched the waving antennae of the Most High without a quiver in their depths.

". . . I did not bring us across the great voids of space to find graves on this planet. Death was more welcome there. I commanded you to use discretion when the ship fell, disabled. Capture, do not kill. Investigate, plot out the land. . . . Instead, you bungled badly. Gaitha, Hutu, and others whom I needed are dead because of that bungling. You knew these strangers had space ships. You knew then they were of a high intelligence. Surely you must have known they possessed means of warfare. But you sent Hutu and the others out, unarmed except with the means nature gave us. So they died. . . .

"Very well, then. The rest of you will be brought to the mother ship. All but Reet. He will remain here. It will be his duty to place the explosives in the proper places. And set them off. . . ."

THE helicopter rose straight upward into the deep blue night. They were cramped for space inside but they managed by having Gloria sit on Merrit Hyland's lap.

"Back to Villa Hermosa?" Harrison said. He was at the controls.

(Continued on page 41)

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# of VENUS

By H. H. HARMON

To die from the poison of the needles of a saro tree was the most horrible torture on all Venus—but maybe the fifels were worse!

IN A TINY clearing around a saro tree in the vast Southlands jungle of Venus, two humans and a Venusian were watching a native die. There was worry on their faces, they were afraid the native was going to die before he talked. After he had talked, of course, they were quite willing for him to die, in fact, they would give him the last necessary shove in that direction, but they didn't want him to pass on to his ancestors until he had told them what they wanted to know.

"Do you suppose this punk is actually going to croak?" Red Haldane worried.

"I think he's playing possum," Ambrose Ritter answered. "Stick another one of them needles in him, to prove we mean business."

The "needles" were actually thorns broken from the saro tree. Needle-sharp and coated with a virulent poison, the natives of the Southlands jungle had used them for ages as blow-gun darts. Humans could usually survive two and sometimes three doses of this poison. Venusians had acquired a certain tolerance to the

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poison and could survive five or six of the needles.

The native on the ground already had four of the needles in him.

A saro tree grew in the center of the little clearing. In fact, the existence of the saro tree accounted for the clearing itself, poison dripping from the thorns killed all vegetation within a radius of ten feet. Reaching up with his gloved hand, Haldane cut another thorn from the tree.

"Where'll I stick this one?" he asked.

The third member of the trio, Kard, a Venusian, spoke softly in the slurry Southlands language. "Don't stick him with it, just scratch him with the point. Better results from scratching. Hurt more, don't die so fast."

"Oh, an expert," Haldane said approvingly. He grinned and spoke to the bound native on the ground. "What say Juth? Wanta talk or want another dose of this?"

He waved the thorn in the air, making scratching motions with it. A small droplet of dark green ooze had already collected on the point. With sick fascination in his eyes, Juth stared at the needle. "Not know," he whispered. "Not know anything about Coth. Please—not know."

"He knows all right," Kard grunted. "He's just stubborn. Go on and scratch him with that saro thorn."

"Scratch yourself with it." Hal McCabe spoke from the edge of the clearing.

The three jumped like startled cats suddenly dropped on top of a hot stove. From the expression on their faces, that had thought no one was within miles of them. Haldane's hand started toward the magna pistol holstered at his hip, Ritter's hand jumped toward the rifle leaning against the saro tree, Kard dropped his hand to the hilt of one of the throwing knives stuck in his belt. When they saw the blunt muzzle of the magna rifle covering them from the edge of the clearing, they quickly changed their minds about reaching for their own weapons.

Nobody in his right mind took a chance on a magna rifle. The three lifted their hands.

"Okay," McCabe said. The two humans he knew vaguely as being jungle traders, which was his occupation also. What they were doing here torturing a native he did not know, but he knew exactly what he was going to do about it. "Shuck the gun. You first, Red." Muttered protests formed on Haldane's lips—he didn't want to lose his gun. Gently, McCabe squeezed the trigger of his rifle. There was a soft *phut*. No smoke came from the barrel of the rifle but something howled past Haldane's head, and flared in sudden violence in the jungle behind—the explosive shell of the magna gun.

"Better do as you're told," McCabe said. "You're a long way from taw."

HALDANE hastily unbuckled the gun belt and let the pistol slide to the ground. McCabe turned the magna rifle toward the Venusian. The belt of throwing knives followed the pistol. Ritter had no hand gun. The rifle leaning against the tree apparently belonged to him.

"Good," McCabe said.

"Who the hell are you? What the hell—"

"Each of you break a fresh thorn from the saro tree," McCabe said, as if he had not heard the question.

The three hesitated. Although they didn't understand the purpose of the order, they didn't like it. With the squirming native before his eyes, knowing they had been using torture, McCabe had no hesitancy. "Break off the thorns," he repeated. His voice was the coldest sound ever heard on

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Venus. Reluctantly the three obeyed him. Breaking off the dripping thorns, they fingered them carefully.

"Stand in a circle," McCabe ordered. The three men shuffled into position.

"All right," McCabe said. "We're going to play a little game here. Each of you sticks the man in front of him. Ready now? Stick!" His voice roaring out the command, at the same instant he fired a shot from the magna rifle. The startled Venusian, his nerves already on edge, jabbed Red Haldane. Haldane roared in pain, and jabbed Ritter in an uncontrollable motion. Ritter screamed and jabbed the Venusian.

The effect of the saro poison is similar to a jab with a red-hot soldering iron. The poison in the needles produced instant pain and violent, uncontrollable, muscular contortions. A man who has been jabbed with a saro needle breaks instantly into a wild dance. A second later, so intense is the pain, he starts running.

The three dived headfirst into the jungle. Yells and the sounds of breaking branches came back after them. Listening to the sounds go out of hearing, McCabe grinned. "You dirty bums, you got exactly what was coming to you." He stepped out into the clearing.

Revealed was a big man, tall and well muscled, with a broad face and cold gray eyes. Greenish-colored water-proof clothes disappeared into water-proof boots, the standard water and bug-proof garb of a human in the Venusian jungle. His waist was circled by a broad belt, which held cartridge pouches, a hatchet in a protected sheath, two of the Venusian throwing knives. On his back was the typical pack of a trader.

He knelt beside the squirming, bound Venusian. Quickly he counted the livid patches of slowly spreading red, the marks of the saro needles, shook his head when he saw four of them. Even to a native, this was going to be close. From his pack, he took a sealed box, which, opened revealed a hypodermic syringe and needles. Quickly he flushed an antiseptic solution through the syringe, plunged the needle into an ampule of colorless liquid. Into each of the patches of spreading red, he made a quick injection. Cleaning and replacing the hypodermic equipment in its container, he untied the native, made him as comfortable as possible, lit a cigarette, and waited. Already, under the influence of the drug, the native's breathing had grown less labored and his heart action had improved. "What's your name?" McCabe said.

The native gazed at him from devoted eyes. "Juth," he answered.

"What were they trying to get from you, Juth?"

"They try get me to take them to land of Coth," Juth replied. "Or tell them the way. I not want to."

"Coth?" McCabe mused. "Never heard of it." There were depths in this jungle that no human had ever penetrated, he knew. This was one reason he liked the place. Although space travel had been established for over twenty years, here in this jungle a man might find—anything. Venus was Earth all over again, with one important difference. It was Earth before the coming of civilization, before the dawn of the great barbarisms, Earth in the days of its wandering tribes, Earth in its savage jungle days.

FROM THE jungle came a howl. From another direction came a series of grunts. Somewhere a lizard was singing, a high thin song like the piping of a wren. McCabe, whose ears missed nothing, knew that the howl came from a frog, that the grunts

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came from a mottled hyena hunting carrion, and as for the singing of the lizard, the sound took him back to Earth, back to the days when he was a boy watching the wrens nest in the tin can beside the kitchen door. The singing lizard always made him homesick. He shrugged the homesickness out of his mind. Venus was his home now.

Off in the distant sky, just under the canopy of eternal clouds, shadows moved. For a moment, McCabe thought they were planes, although he knew the only planes on Venus were helicopters brought by humans. Then he saw the flapping wings.

Along the back of his neck, hair crawled. The things that flapped in the sky were huge birds. As he watched they slid out of sight into the clouds.

"The great birds of Venus!" he thought. As a trader, he had heard his fair share of what he considered to be tall tales. Once a native had told him a tale of a lost tribe that lived somewhere in the Southlands jungle and raised and trained huge birds. There was something else too, about the birds and the bird people... He couldn't remember what it was except that it hadn't been pleasant.

From behind him came a sudden wail. Turning, he saw the native had struggled to his feet and was pointing toward the sky where the huge birds had vanished. His face, already blotched with pain and oozing drops of green perspiration where the drug was boiling the saro poison out of him, was wretched with fear. Clutching at McCabe to hold himself erect, he poured slurred words into the human's ear, speaking so rapidly that the trader could not understand him.

"Slow down, old man. What's wrong."

"The *fifel*—" McCabe translated the word literally to mean "flying death". "The fifel come. Hide!" Tugging at McCabe, the native urged him to seek hiding in the jungle. McCabe patted the stock of the magna rifle, with this gun he had stopped the charge of a swamp alligator that weighed three tons.

"I've got my own brand of flying death," he said.

The native shook his head. "Gun no good," he said. "No stop flying death." Over and over again he said it. McCabe was unmoved. "You've got so much saro poison in you that you're nuts," he said.

Off in the distance a rain squall was approaching. He fitted the cover over his pack and pulled the hood over his head. From the ground he picked up the magna pistol and buckled the belt around his waist. Juth clutched at the belt of throwing knives. buckled it around him—and watched the sky.

The rain squall struck. "Hide," the native repeated.

"Okay," McCabe answered. They moved into the jungle.

Above them, from the heavy growth of interlacing leaves, came the drum of raindrops. Down on the ground level was misty twilight. The jungle formed a canopy over them but Juth seemed to feel the canopy was no protection. Listening, watching every opening in the branches above them, he continually urged McCabe to hurry. Suddenly he stopped, hissed sharply, and jerked his head up like a dog on a point.

Through an opening in the leaves above them, McCabe caught a glimpse of gigantic wings beating the air. Rising above the drum beat of the rain on the leaves were sharp, shrill voices calling back and forth to each other.

The giant birds! The fifel were

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above them. McCabe lifted the magna rifle, then gulped as he caught a clear glimpse of one of the huge creatures. The bird had a rider!

THIS ONE fact was enough to make the trader gasp. But there was a second, even more startling fact. The rider was a woman! And not only a woman but a woman from Earth.

So far as McCabe knew there were not a hundred human women on the whole steaming planet. There wasn't one in the whole Southlands jungle area and there wouldn't be one, McCabe had always thought, in the next century. They liked their comfort too well to buck the jungle, style shows, new clothes, perfumed baths, none of which were available in the jungle. Hence, no women.

Except one! And she rode a gigantic bird that, from its looks was more reptile than fowl.

As McCabe gawked upward, his mind heavy with wonder, the second giant bird flapped into sight above them. Looking down, the rider seemed to catch a glimpse of him through the opening in the leaves. Calling out shrilly, the rider pointed downward, then flung something that came smashing through the green leaves above them.

"Run!" Juth screamed. "Get away—quick!"

"A bomb!" McCabe thought. He started to run. The bomb hit within ten feet of him and exploded with a soft phut. The explosion would not have harmed a singing lizard and McCabe's first thought was that the bomb was a dud. Then as a giant hand seemed to reach inside of him and grab his lungs in a paralyzing grip, he realized only too well what the bomb contained.

"Gas!" he choked out.

It was the last word he spoke. The ground seemed suddenly to come up and hit him in the face. He went down like a falling tree, in a clatter of useless magna weapons, hit the ground, groaned, tried to get to his feet, and collapsed, unconscious.

The native, holding his nose, got a few steps farther than the trader. Then a second bomb smashed through the leaves and the Venusian, forced to open his mouth to breathe, got a lungfull of the gas and went down to the ground with the trader.

Above them, over the rain-splashed jungle, flapped two mighty creatures out of nightmare land, two flying reptiles. Off in the far distance, others were coming.

Like vultures, They circled, then like vultures finding waiting carrion, they came down.

THE AFTER EFFECTS of the gas were not pleasant. McCabe's first dazed impression was that his head was going to split open. Then, as he realized how his stomach was feeling, he hoped his head would split open.

On Venus, a trader has to have an iron constitution and a level head. Both are needed to survive. Venus is no place for little Nellies.

No one had ever accused Hal McCabe of having lace on the edge of his underpants. When he opened his eyes, rolled over and sat up, cursing the way his head felt, he discovered he didn't even have any underpants.

Stripped competely naked, he was in a cell as bare as he was. Dim light filtered through a barred window high up on one wall. Between the bars splashed the eternal rain of Venus. The 52 hour day was drawing to a close. With McCabe was Juth.

The red blotches of the saro poison had almost disappeared and Juth was looking better. The expression

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on his face said he wasn't feeling as well as he looked. Like McCabe, Juth was without clothes.

Holding his head in both hands, Juth groaned. "Head him feel like hell."

"Head him feel like mine," McCabe answered. "Stomach him feel worse. Where the hell are we?"

"That's where we are," Juth answered.

"Huh?" McCabe grunted, not understanding.

"In hell," Juth said.

Since hell was an Earth word and an Earth concept, Juth didn't really know what the word meant. All he knew was that it was supposed to be a bad place. But, if he didn't have a clear conception of the meaning of hell, he did know exactly where he was. And in his opinion, he was in a very bad place.

"Land of Coth, land of fifel," Juth said. "Same as hell. Maybe worse. Rather be in hell than back here."

"*Back* here?" McCabe questioned.

"I here once," Juth explained. "Captured, brought here, turned loose in valley. Got away. Fifel after me. You with me when they caught me. Bad luck for you." He shook his head sorrowfully.

McCabe grunted soundlesly. He got slowly to his feet, moved to the wall, and looked up at the grill in the window above him. His first leap was short. His second enabled him to catch one of the bars. He pulled himself up to the window.

Overhead, so near the wisps of mist were passing just above the window, were the eternal clouds of Venus. Below him was a straight drop of hundreds of feet. Stretching away into the distance, almost hemmed in by mountains, was a tremendous valley. As he watched a giant bird rose from the valley, flapped upward through the rain, lit on a ledge, and waddled out of sight. From its talons dangled a swamp deer.

"Valley is hunting grounds of fifel," Juth said from the floor. "Birds are trained there."

Under the pressure of McCabe's weight, the bar to which he was clinging was slowly bending. He stared at it. The metal was overlaid with a thick layer of greenish corrosion but at the spot where the bar was bending the corrosion was cracking away, revealing the dull yellow color of the metal underneath. A pressure began to build up inside the trader. He dropped back to the floor. "Juth, those bars are made of gold!" he exclaimed.

"So what?" Juth said, utterly unimpressed. "You can bend bars and get out. Long way to ground. Big broken neck if you go that way."

"I wasn't thinking about getting out," McCabe answered. "Those bars are made out of gold. Doesn't that mean anything to you."

Juth shrugged, conveying the impression that gold meant something but that his neck meant more. "Much gold here. Very common. That's why they were sticking saro thorns in me, to get me to guide them to land of Coth. They wanted gold. Me, I wanted to stay alive."

"I see," McCabe said grimly. "So that was what those buzzards wanted?" For a moment, he wished he had been a little careless in aiming the magna rifle.

"Sure," Juth said. "What good is gold to a dead man?" He shrugged.

"Eh?" McCabe said, startled.

"You and me same as dead men," the native answered.

"You got out of this place once, didn't you?" the trader challenged.

"Once," Juth answered. "Very, very lucky. Nobody ever be so lucky twice."

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"Tell me about this land of Coth," McCabe answered. "Maybe we can figure out some way to be lucky twice."

OUT OF THE halting words, he got a picture of a vast section of land lost in the Southlands swamp, its location, even its very existence unknown to most natives of Venus. Probably it had been mapped on the radar screens of space ships from Earth but the mountains and the swampy jungle had discouraged attempts at landing here. Even the hardy traders had never penetrated to Coth. From Juth's answers, McCabe got the impression that of all the savage places on this planet, the land of Coth was the most savage.

"They turn us loose down in valley," Juth finished. "Hunt us with great birds. Much fun—but not for us."

"Eh?" McCabe said. "You're nuts, Juth." But deep in his heart, McCabe suspected the native was telling the truth. He knew Venus and Venus was Earth in the days of Earth's cruel youth, when strong men took what they wanted of the wealth and the women and weak men took what was left. In his more candid moments, McCabe could not see where the Earth had ever really advanced beyond this point. Men used space ships and knew how to control the atom, they had magic drugs to cure diseases, their astronomers probed the depths beyond the stars, their living was made comfortable by a host of gadgets, in these and a thousand other ways they had advanced, but in devious ways the strong men still got what they wanted of the available wealth and women. Men had hunted each other with bows and arrows, with spears and meat axes, with poison gas and atom bombs. Why shouldn't one tribe of Venusians hunt other Venusians with giant birds? McCabe grunted tonelessly. There wasn't any reason why they shouldn't. It was just his bad luck to be on the hunted end.

A metallic clang came from a section of the wall and a door swung aside. Three natives, armed with swords and the eternal throwing knives, entered. Behind them came the woman McCabe had seen riding the giant bird. The three natives said nothing. The woman moved forward into the cell.

There followed then the spectacle of a tough jungle trader trying desperately hard to hide behind a Venusian as McCabe, remembering his nakedness, tried to put Juth between him and the advancing woman. "Get out of here!" he yelled.

The girl stopped and stared at him, astonishment on her face. To her, the fact that he was unclothed meant nothing. She didn't have on many clothes herself and she was completely accustomed to the society of unclothed natives.

Profanity rumbled deep in McCabe's throat. This was no way to treat a man. "What do you want?"

"I—I want to talk to you," she answered hesitantly, apparently at a loss as how to interpret his strange actions in trying to hide behind another person. "Bel-ast captured you. He claims you do not belong to any of the jungle peoples, or even to Venus." She spoke in the slurred Southlands language but a dialect that McCabe had trouble in understanding.

"So I don't," he answered. "I came from another world."

"Another world?" Sudden eagerness showed in her eyes, then was quickly blotted out. "But there are no other worlds." Glancing sideways at the natives with her, she repeated the words as if they were some lesson she had learned and must not forget.

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McCABE STARED at her, incredulously. Her gray eyes and brown hair, her lithe legs and tanned skin, the shape of her face, these and a thousand other things told him she came from Earth. Why, then, should she deny the existence of other worlds? "What makes, baby?" he said softly, in English. "Have these buzzards got you behind the eight ball?" He glanced at the natives with her.

She frowned at him, her eyes blank of u n d e r s t a n d i n g. "What noises are these?" she asked.

"What kind of a game are you playing?" McCabe said angrily. He thought he was being tricked, somehow. There was also the galling irritation of his nakedness and the fact that he had to keep hiding behind Juth. Why in the hell had they taken his clothes away from him? Without clothes, he couldn't think what he was saying to this woman. "Sure. I came from another world. So did you. Haven't you ever seen a space ship?"

The expression in her eyes seemed to indicate she thought he was crazy. Many natives, lost under the eternal cloud banks, had never seen a space ship, but this girl had certainly seen one, had in fact arrived in Venus in one. There just wasn't any other way to get here.

One of the natives stepped forward, lifting his sword. "Shall I teach this animal some manners?" he asked, indicating McCabe.

At the sight of the sword, Juth dropped instantly to the floor. McCabe stood naked and alone in the middle of the room. As the native glanced over his shoulder at the girl, to see what she wanted him to do about teaching this animal some manners, the animal stepped forward, caught the native's sword hand wrist in his left hand, shoved the sword out of the way and drove his right fist clear up to the wrist into the native s stomach.

The native whooshed air in a gasping grunt and went down, the sword clattering on the floor. McCabe snatched up the glittering weapon. "Grab the girl, Juth!" he yelled. The two natives were already moving.

IN THIS moment, McCabe would have given a year of his life for a magna pistol. The two natives had been standing together. As McCabe picked up the sword, they split apart and each drawing a sword, came at him from different directions. If he had had a magna pistol, they would have been sitting ducks, but armed with a sword, he was the sitting fowl. From the left a sword reached at him. He struck it aside. From the right the second native moved in, sword arm outstretched in a diving lunge—and screamed in pain as the sword arm was suddenly cut completely in two. McCabe gasped. The girl had snatched free the sword strapped around her own shapely waist and had moved into the fight—on his side!

McCabe was so astonished at the sight that the native coming in from the left almost spitted him before he realized what was happening. He swayed to one side. The sword passed under his arm. Dropping his own weapon, he closed his left arm around the native's neck. Fists and the use of fists McCabe thoroughly understood. His right fist came up. There was a solid *thwuck!* Released, the native spun backward and collapsed, moaning, in the corner of the cell.

McCabe turned to face the girl. "Thanks," he said. She started to speak. He held up his hand. "Just a minute." Stripping the clothing from the unconscious native in the corner, he speedily donned it himself. "Okay, now I'm ready to talk."

The native who had lost an arm was

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clasping the stump and standing in sullen silence against the wall. Juth was busy picking up swords and strapped belts of throwing knives around his middle.

"So they were holding you prisoner?" McCabe spoke to the girl.

"No, not exactly. They considered me as one of their people." From her lips, in slurred Venusian and the stumbling, halting English that a child might use—or a person who has not spoken the language for a long time—poured a torrent of words. "I've been living here in this valley for twelve years. My father was a trader. He landed here in a space ship and the natives attacked him. Because I was only a child at the time, they adopted me."

"And you have been living here as a Venusian girl all this time?" McCabe gasped.

"Living here and waiting for the day when one of my own people would come here!" she answered. 'I didn't dare try to escape without help. They would catch me and—" A shudder passed over her body. Her eyes came up to McCabe. "Will you help me?"

"Of course!" the astonished trader answered. "The only catch is—how? Juth tells me it isn't exactly easy to escape from the land of Coth."

"Don't worry about that," the quick answer came. "Less than a month ago, I discovered a perfect way to escape from this place. But I had to have help. Just as soon as night comes, we'll be gone. That is—if you will help me?"

"It's a deal!" McCabe answered instantly. "But first, I want my own weapons, if you can get them for me."

"I can and I will. Come with me."

"But what about these birds?" McCabe indicated the three natives.

"Leave them here," the girl answered. "We'll lock the door on the outside. They can't escape."

"Hot golly damn!" Juth said, as he and McCabe followed the girl to the door. Outside of the cell was a tunnel cut into solid rock. The door had a heavy metal bar, which they fitted into place. In the distance down the tunnel a flaring torch set in a wall socket gave a dim illumination to the scene.

"The whole mountain is honeycombed with tunnels and living quarters," the girl explained. "The people of Coth live here, in the mountain itself. There are levels above and below this one. If we meet anyone, act as if you belong here and the chances are, you won't be noticed. Your weapons are two levels below this one and we have to go down to the bottom level to escape."

THEY MOVED down the tunnel. Below the first torch was an open door, with dim light coming from inside. Through the door, they caught a glimpse of a Venusian family moving about. The sleeping mats had been laid out and the natives were preparing for the coming of night. Since their world turned on its axis once in every fifty-two hours, the natives had adjusted themselves to a sleeping period of approximately this length. For the next fifty-two hours, McCabe hoped the whole tribe of Coth would sleep like so many logs.

They walked boldly past the open doorway and the Venusians inside did not so much as glance at them.

More torches appeared in the wall niches, each one marking the door of living quarters. Each time they walked past. The girl, of course, was known. In the dim light, the two men with her were not conspicious. When she led them safely down two levels

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and opened a door and placed his magna rifle in his hands, McCabe almost whooped with joy. With this gun in his possession, he could lick the whole tribe of Coth. The pistols were in this room too. He removed the sword harness he had taken from the native and strapped the pistol belts around his waist.

"Okay, sweetheart, what next?" the trader asked.

"Sweetheart?" The English word puzzled her and she repeated it, trying to grasp the meaning. "Don't let it worry you," McCabe laughed. "It's just a name for a pretty girl. By the way, what is your real name?"

A shadow crossed her face. "I do not remember my real name. My name in the land of Coth is Le-ann."

"All right, Le-ann, lead us out of here." He had no idea where she was taking them but she had said she knew a way to escape and she had proved she knew all the ins and outs of the land of Coth. He and Juth followed her. They went down, down, down. The wall torches disappeared. They moved through darkness. Ahead came the sound of running water and McCabe knew where she was taking them. Into the swamp! Coming to the end of the tunnel, the swamp was before them.

The night was pitch black and they couldn't see the swamp but they could hear it. There was the sound of rain and the splash of water falling down the face of the cliff and above every other sound there was audible a vast, submerged, never-ending roar that came from the life in the swamp itself. The roar was composed of a thousand different sounds, the soft singing of a lizard, the distant muted bellow of an alligator, the hollow booming of love-hungry frogs as big as washtubs, all blended into one vast symphony of sound. There were beasts out in the valley who made no sound, McCabe knew, like the wegarths, the hunting dinosaurs, who moved in silence. Le-ann didn't seem to mind either the darkness or the booming symphony of death coming from the swamp. "Follow me," she said, and plunged forward.

"Hold up, hold up!" Juth protested He was a native and he did mind the swamp. "Cross swamp at night!" Horror sounded in his voice.

"But we're not going to cross it," Le-ann answered. "We're only going a little distance." Urgency sounded in her voice. "Let me tell you, it would be better to try to cross the swamp on foot than to risk recapture by the men of Coth."

"The devil in front and the devil behind," McCabe muttered. "Lead on." He followed the girl. Juth followed him. But Juth didn't like it. McCabe could hear the native praying softly to dim Venusian gods to protect him from all the dangers of the planet, but to protect him most from women and the swamp.

THEY SPLASHED through water and mud. Slippery things moved reluctantly out of their way. In spite of the almost total blackness, the girl moved swiftly, not minding the rain or the mud any more than a native. Trying to estimate how far they had gone, McCabe guessed they had traveled less than half a mile. They were in a grove of tall trees and among a nest of interlacing vines. If there was a trail, only the girl knew where it was located. She stopped. "Wait here a moment," her whisper came. She slid forward into the darkness and disappeared.

Behind McCabe Juth stirred apprehensively, muttering about the delay. "There are wegarths in this place," Juth's whisper came. "I smelled one not two minutes ago."

"Hell, I know there are wegarths

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here," McCabe answered. "Shut up, before they smell you." He gripped the stock of the magna rifle. Ahead of him there was a click and a rasp of metal. Then silence. Then sudden light.

McCabe stepped back, stifling the cry that sprang to his lips. He did not know what he had been expecting but light streaming from a round door in a metal hull was the last thing he had been expecting to see in the middle of this swamp! Before him was the port of a space ship! From that port Le-ann beckoned to them. Her voice rang out. "In here! Quickly!"

McCabe needed no urging. He moved forward, Juth hastily following him. An instant later they were inside the air lock and Le-ann was closing the door behind them. She moved forward, unlocked and opened an inner door, closed a wall switch. Lights gleamed ahead of them, revealing what was unquestionably a room where men entering and leaving this vessel had changed clothes. Bulky space suits still hung in open lockers. A litter of disarranged equipment lay in one corner, oxygen masks, gloves, helmets, an old model magna rifle.

"Lord in heaven, Le-ann!" the trader whispered.

"This is my father's ship," she said quietly. "We will use it to escape from this valley."

The words and the tone in which they were spoken took McCabe's breath away. He stared at the girl, saw the expression on her face.

"I just located it," she explained. "When I found it my memory came back and I remembered what it was and who I was. But I couldn't fly it. If I had ever known how, I had forgotten."

"And you expect me to help you fly it?" McCabe whispered.

"Of course," she said, simply. Delight made her face radiant.

"This is the way you expect to escape?"

"Yes," she answered.

McCabe started to speak, choked over the words. One glance at the tumbled disarray of equipment in the corner told him that this ship had been heavily damaged in landing here. It had been in this spot twelve years, long enough for a jungle of vines and creepers to grow around it. Finding it, this girl had tried to make it fly. Now she expected him with his greater knowledge, to do the task she had been unable to do.

"Le-ann—" He choked again. She just didn't know. From what she had told him and from the condition of the ship, he suspected that she had taken a hard lick in the landing crack-up. Perhaps her memory had been lost. She didn't know how space ships operated, he doubted if she had ever known. When this ship had landed here, she had been a child, incapable of understanding the intricacies of an atomic drive, of steering, lifting, and driving tubes. And now she did not know that this ship would never fly again. When she had found the ship after long years, it had seemed to her to be in perfect condition. True, she hadn't been able to make it work—what risks had she unknowingly taken in trying! But McCabe could.

She read on his face what he was thinking. "Please—" she whispered. "You can make it fly again."

He shook his head. "Nobody can make this ship fly again," he said, as gently as he could.

"BUT THE lights work," she protested in a whisper, her face suddenly as pale as death itself. "If the lights work, surely the ship will work."

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"The ship draws its power from an atomic drive," he tried to explain. "An atomic engine lasts forever. Current for the lighting system is drawn from a magnetic converter and current will be generated as long as the converter lasts. Since it has no moving parts, it may last a hundred years, or until the insulation breaks down between the windings. The lights will work as long as the converter works, or until their filaments burn out, but that doesn't mean the ship will fly. I'm sorry—"

The pain of bitter disappointment showed on her face. "Then I brought you here for nothing? I'm sorry.... I thought...." He saw tears in her eyes. He put his arm around her, patted her very gently. "You did the best you could, Le-ann. You tried. Juth and me appreciate it, don't we, Juth."

"Damned right," Juth answered. "Better here than back there. But we still have to walk out of damned swamp." He shook his head vigorously. "Walk no good. Mighty soon dead."

"Anyhow we have a safe place to lie up and rest," McCabe said to the girl. "You got that for us. Now it's up to us to get out of this place. In the meantime, I'm both hungry and tired...."

"There are tins in the lockers," Le-ann said. She found the tins for them. The preserved food was still edible. He and Juth ate like hungry wolves.

Outside in the night the swamp roared unheard. For this long night, they had food and shelter. Tomorrow some denizen of this swamp might make a meal off of them but tonight the stout steel hull of the wrecked ship protected them. In a bunk that some spaceman had once occupied, McCabe went contentedly to sleep.

On Earth, he would have slept the clock around before he awakened. On Venus, his twelve-hour sleep was less than a quarter of the night. On a second bunk, Juth still snored. If left undisturbed, the native would probably sleep out the entire night. Having never learned to sleep fifty-two hours at a stretch, McCabe rose. He looked in at the cabin Le-ann had chosen, found she was still asleep, and went sternward to the engine room, hoping against hope that by some miracle he would discover the ship was still capable of flight.

It was a vain hope. The engine was still there, hidden away beneath its shield of Zwenthoffer's metal, but the stern drive tubes had rusted to paper thin shells. Moisture had crept up the tubes, rusting them away. The thought of moisture in this engine room sent him quickly to examine the shielding around the atomic engine. Examining it, he was making clucking noises of dismay deep in his throat, when a sound came from behind him. Turning, he saw Le-ann had awakened and had followed him into the engine room.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "I heard someone moving. Can you make it fly after all?" Hope showed on her face.

McCabe shook his head. "No. And there's something else...." Fear was beginning to climb through him. "Get back," he told the girl. "Get out of the engine room. Quick."

SHE DIDN'T understand the reason but she obeyed him. From the passage, she called out. "What's wrong?"

McCabe did not answer. He was examining the shielding. Zwenthoffer's metal, of course, had made possible the use of an atomic drive on space ships. This silvery-appearing metal was a shield that effectively stopped gamma and other types of hard radiation flowing from an

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atomic drive. Without Zwenthoffer's metal, the lead shielding required to make an atomic drive safe for humans to use would have weighed so many tons that the ship would be incapable of flight. Zwenthoffer's metal had been a god-send to space engineers, but it had one important deficiency—in the presence of moisture, it tended to break down. Hence all engine rooms were well equipped with devices to sop up all possible moisture.

But moisture had crept into this engine room through the rusted drive tubes....

McCabe turned to the wall counters, saw that they had all gone out of order long ago. In a supply locker, he found a spare radiation counter, a portable type, which was still serviceable.

The instant it was set in operation, the little warning bell with which it was equipped began to ring, and the needle on the top of the case jumped over into the red as far as it could go.

McCabe backed hastily from the engine room, closing the door behind him, noting as he did so that the door was lined with Zwenthoffer's metal.

Outside the door the ringing of the bell slowed but did not stop and the needle of the gauge remained over in the red.

"What is wrong?" Le-ann questioned, worried but not knowing why.

"The engine room is red-hot with gamma radiation," McCabe answered. "An hour or two in there is sudden death."

"Radiation?" She did not understand.

"I haven't got time to explain it." He moved forward, checking with the counter. Away from the engine room, the radiation was less, but even in the forward control room the needle remained too near the danger area.

"This settles it," McCabe said. "We've got to get out of this ship right now."

Moving to the bunk, he began to shake the sleeping Juth. "Wake up, sleepy head. Climb out of that sack. We're clearing out."

"Clearing out? Not going into swamp!"

"Maybe, maybe not," McCabe answered. "Get yourself ready."

He didn't like the idea of crossing the swamp any better than Juth but he could see no way to cross it in safety, except one. He turned to the girl, seeking information. She answered his questions promptly but when she understood what he was going to try to do, horror moved on her face.

"The odds are ten to one against us, if we try that!" she exclaimed.

"They're a thousand to one against us if we try anything else," he answered. "We're going to try my way. If we fail we won't be any deader than we will be if we stay where we are now."

"All right, we'll try it," Le-ann agreed.

A few minutes later, they again opened the lock. This time they were quitting the space ship that so short a time before had seemed a secure refuge but had been revealed as a hidden death trap.

Outside the lock was darkness. The hour was about the equivalent of eleven o'clock on earth. Rain was still falling. If in the early evening the sound from the swamp had seemed a rough approximation of bedlam, now that the middle of the night was approaching, the sound had almost doubled in volume.

As they opened the lock, a wegarth that had somehow managed to smell out their hiding place and had waited patiently in the hope that they would sometime emerge, stuck its

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lean neck into the opening and reached a fanged mouth for them. Le-ann screamed and tried to draw back.

McCabe fired once with the magna rifle. The bullet struck the back of the giant reptile's throat, g o i n g straight into the gaping mouth. The explosion blew a hole the size of a basketball in the throat of the beast, shattering the spinal column. The wegarth collapsed in the doorway.

They left it there, pushed past it, fled into the night, the girl, Le-ann leading the way.

THE KEEPER of the fifel twisted restlessly in his sleep. The long night was near its end and his rest was almost complete. When the sun rose, important events were due to happen, events in which he, as keeper of the fifel, was due to play an important part. . . . The two prisoners brought in the day before would be released into the valley and given a start, then the fifel would be turned loose. The warriors both male and female of Coth would ride the fifel and the rest of the tribe would watch the show from the high cliffs, screaming their delight and approval each time a circling bird spotted its prey and dived with outstretched talons for the kill. Or, if the fleeing prisoners managed to find refuge among the trees where the fifel could not get to them, then the gas bombs would be dropped and the warriors would go in. The gas bombs were the invention of a forgotten genius of Coth, perhaps the only genius the tribe had ever produced.

Twisting in his sleep, the keeper dreamed of directing the hunt.

Dozing half asleep and half awake, the keeper thought he heard a light footstep near him. One of his helpers, he thought, coming to ask his permission to begin preparing the fifel for the hunt. Let the fellow wait a minute, the keeper thought.

A hand closed around the keeper's throat, cutting off all chance at a yell. His arms were grabbed. Even before he realized what was happening, he was gagged, his hands were tied behind his back, he was yanked to his feet, and a cold voice was whispering in his ear. "Lead up to the fifel cages. And if you make a noise, you will get a knife in the middle of the back. Stick him if he makes a sound," the voice continued, to some second person present.

"Glad to," the second person answered. "Juth very glad to stick this one."

With the point of a knife, Juth prodded the startled keeper forward. McCabe and Le-ann followed close behind. Ahead of them, the tunnel opened to the outer air on a high ledge. Dawn lights were in the sky and the rain had stopped.

"I wish we could have made this hop at night," McCabe said. "It would have been a darned sight safer. If this joint wakes up before we get away, we'll have a nest of hornets after us."

"The fifel sleep at night," Le-ann answered. "If awakened, they are vicious and unmanageable. They can be used only in the day. Hear! They are beginning to awaken now."

AHEAD OF them were muffled noises that sounded like the broken cawing of monstrous crows. Also, there was a leathery rustling, an occasional drum-beat of giant wings. Next they smelled the creatures. It was the most horrible stench McCabe had ever smelled. "Phew!" he whispered under his breath. "If we have to stand much of this, I'm going back and tackle the jungle."

The girl had placed a piece of cloth over her nose and was trying

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to breathe through it. "It's awful, I know. I never could get used to it. I hope this is the last time I ever have to smell it."

"One way or another, I imagine it is," McCabe answered. The keeper of the fifel did not mind the rank odor coming from their cages and Juth did not seem to notice it.

"Each is kept in a separate cage," the girl explained. "If they put more than one in a cage at night, there's never but one left the next morning. One eats the other."

"Nice brutes," McCabe said.

They reached the cages, a row of grilled doors set in the walls of the tunnel. The keeper's hands were released and under the pressure of the knife, he was told to put riding harness on the fifel. This he did by dropping a loop of rope over their necks, drawing it tight from a ceiling hook, and after the monster was half-choked, entering the cell and placing a bridle and saddle on the great birds. Each saddle was equipped with a shield and either a sword or an axe. The bridle reins were tied so tight to the saddle that the fifel could hardly turn their heads. "Otherwise they're likely to eat their riders," the girl explained.

Wings flapping, claws dragging, three of the fifel were dragged forth to the high ledge.

A thousand feet down below, soaked in the steaming mist of the morning, was the valley.

"You guide them by pulling on the reins," Le-ann explained. "If they don't do what you want, beat them over the head with the saddle sword. And don't try to be gentle with them."

"Okay," McCabe said. "We'll take off. But first we'll tie up the keeper again." He turned. The keeper was gone. Juth, engrossed in dodging a hooked claw that was thrust at him, had momentarily taken his eyes off the keeper.

"Come on!" the girl yelled. "We haven't a minute to waste." She swung into the saddle, jerked loose the tie rope, and snatching the sword from its scabbard, hit the fifel a smashing blow on the back with it. The ungainly creature squawked and leaped forward, straight off the ledge. McCabe held his breath. Gigantic wings beat the air. Air borne, the fifel flew away, the girl waving at them to follow her.

"You next, Juth," McCabe said. "I'll bring up the rear in case we get company."

"Here goes nothing," Juth answered. He stepped into the saddle. Scorning the use of the sword, he jabbed the fifel with his throwing knife. The giant bird leaped straight up. Juth clung to the saddle for dear life.

Then McCabe took off. His bird jumped from the ledge and dived straight down. He had the sickening sensation of falling free. Then giant wings spread out and beat the air and the bird was flying. McCabe breathed again. It was possible to ride these monsters! Up until now, he had hardly dared believe it.

Across the top of the jungle, the three giant birds flapped away, Le-ann in the lead. Each flap of the monstrous wings was taking the three nearer to safety. Le-ann, looking back toward the high ledge, screamed and pointed. Turning his head, McCabe saw a whole procession of the monstrous birds launching themselves from the high cliff.

"Well, let 'em come," he thought. He lifted the magna rifle.

MIST SWIRLED around them as they flew into a bank of fog. Above them was a cloud bank. Flying out of the fog, for a moment the

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pursuers were invisible, then they came in sight again, closer now. Fierce cries sounded behind them, light glinted on the blades of drawn swords. Le-ann's white face was turned toward McCabe as she urged the fifel to great speed, beating it with the sword. She moved ahead. McCabe, making no effort to keep up with her, deliberately fell behind. He waited.

The warriors of Coth were less than a hundred yards away. When they were within fifty yards, McCabe lifted the rifle to his shoulder. The gun belched, firing on full automatic as he kept the trigger pulled down, sweeping the ranks of the approaching hunters of Coth with bursting magna charges.

The shrill cries of exultation turned to screams of alarm as the hail of death hit them. Stricken fifel plunged downward carrying their riders with them. Wounded birds tried to right themselves and failing, joined the downward plunge. Great gaps were blown in the ranks of the pursuers.

"First time they ever run into a magan rifle," McCabe grunted. "I wonder how they like it."

Swish!

Out of the cloud-bank above him, diving with outstretched neck and closed wings, came a gigantic fifel. Crouched low in the saddle, brandishing his sword, the daring rider was barely visible.

McCabe had no time to shoot. He ducked down in the saddle and tried to hold on.

Crash!

The diving bird struck his fifel a glancing blow. Both birds screamed and tried to fight each other. For a moment McCabe had the dazed impression that he was being knocked out of the saddle. Spinning, the magna rifle flew from his hands. To keep from falling, he snatched at the saddle grips. His hands closed around the handle of the axe. He jerked it free.

Locked together the two giant birds were biting at each other. From behind his shield, the warrior of Coth reached for McCabe with the point of a sword. Lifting the axe, the trader brought it down with all his strength. The edge bit heavily into the shield, the warrior ducked down, the two fifel separated.

Up in the cloud bank above him, McCabe caught a glimpse of movement, another warrior diving at him. He dropped the axe. From his belt he snatched the magna pistol. The stream of explosive bullets blasted upward. Above him in the air the diving fifel was struck and struck again. One wing blown from his body by the impact of the explosive charge, the bird turned over. The warrior fell. A scream ripped from his lips as he flashed past McCabe, diving headlong for the jungle far below.

Clinging to the saddle, McCabe waited for the third charge. It did not come. Above him, no movement showed in the cloud bank. Behind him the pursuit had stopped. The warriors of Coth had met at last the magna guns of earth and had gotten themselves a fast bellyful of the blasting weapon.

Looking for Le-ann and Juth, McCabe saw that they were trying to turn and come to his rescue. He waved at them to fly on. He didn't need any help now. They beat the heads of their fifel around, turned the giant birds again toward the rising sun.

Clutching the saddle with one hand, the magna pistol with the other, he followed them. Far ahead of them, the clouds were suddenly bright with light. Over there above the eternal cloud banks of Venus the sun was

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rising—a new day.

Le-ann pulled her fifel near him, yelled out. "Are you all right?"

"Never felt better in my life," he answered. Ahead of them, many miles away but coming closer with each flap of gigantic wings, was the snug trading outpost that he called home. Riding beside him was the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his life. He put the two together—home and a girl. A grin split the leather of his face.

THE END

Continued from page 23

"Wait," Merrit said.

They looked at him. He went on:

"Their ship, the one which crashed, can't be far off. Let's take a look at it."

"A commendable suggestion," Ward said. "The true scientist. He just escapes from what might have been a fate worse than death and wants to walk back into the jaws of the tiger again to see how long its fangs are. Sorry, my boy. We're going back. After we get back to Mexico City then we'll do something about it."

Merrit started to say something but the girl reached around and placed a finger on his lips.

"Darling," she said. "It's taken me years to make you say the things I've been wanting to hear. I want to keep hearing them. Ooh! What was that . . .?"

The heavens had suddenly lit up with a light that turned night to day. The brilliance lasted for ten seconds. Then dimly to their ears came the sustained roar of a terrific explosion. And just before the light died they all saw it. A streak of something silvery passed across their line of vision and vanished into the heavens. It was moving with the speed of light. Tiny flashes of orange flame licked from its sides.

"By George!" Merrit said. "They blew up their crashed ship. . . ."

"They must have landed others who were sent for the sole purpose of destroying it."

"And destroying our proof," Merrit said.

"What about the spiders that were killed?" Gloria asked.

"The tropic air, the vermin, insects, and other destroyers will take care of them. There won't be a shred left of them. Not a shred," Ward said. "And speaking of insects. I'd say the mosquitoes had a holiday with you two. Better take some of that toxin."

"The only bug I worry about," Gloria said as she bared her arm, "is the love bug. I'm glad there's no toxin for that."

For once Merrit's kiss held no life. He was thinking, is this the end? Have we seen the last of them . . .?

THE END

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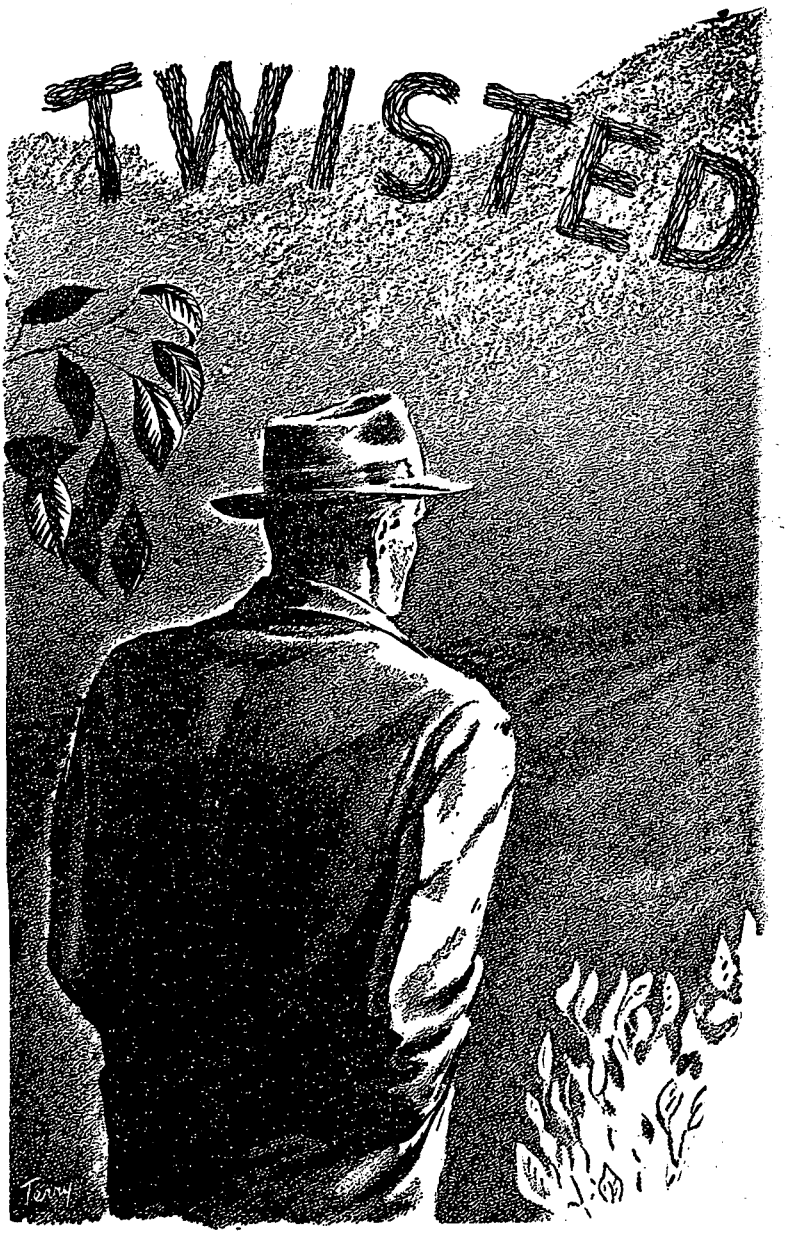

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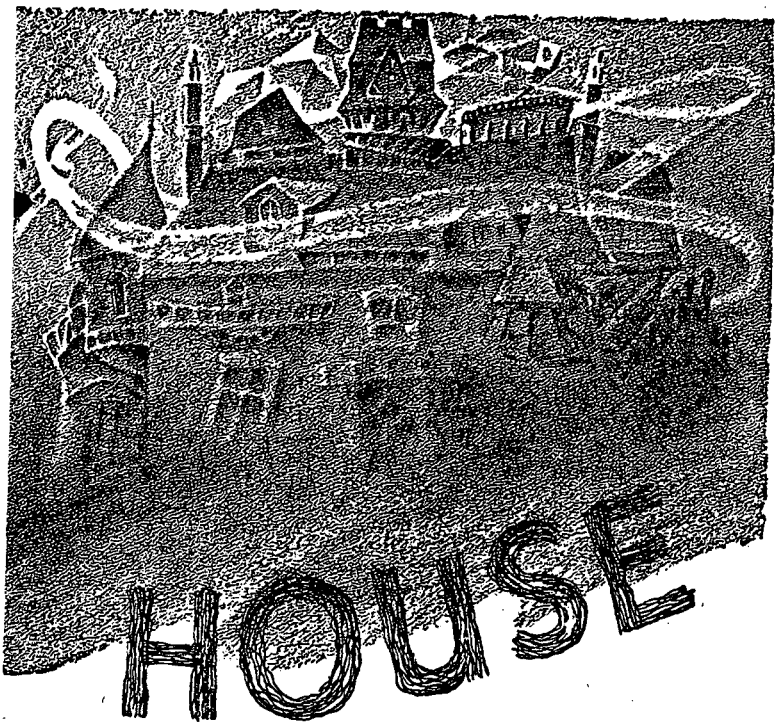

by GUY ARCHETTE

The old man had plenty of money — the question was, how was he getting it? He never left the house, and no bank messenger ever visited it . . .

THE HOUSE was...*queer.* This was the third time Dexter had examined it from the hill-top vantage-point, and he felt its queerness more than ever.

A strange fog seemed to veil it. There was no slightest sign of fog anywhere else. And such of the house as was visible through the fog seemed to waver oddly, as outlines waver when seen through heat waves.

In addition to this, the house was weirdly designed. Wings and bay-fronts jutted at the most unlikely spots, and towers and domes had been placed here and there without rhyme or reason. There was simply no... Dexter groped for the word...no symmetry about the house. There was just a grotesque appearance of un-

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balance, an eerie shifting and twisting when one looked too long.

And Dexter had looked too long. He knew the longer he looked the less he would know about what had happened to Stella. For Stella had worked in that house—and she had disappeared.

She hadn't been the first, Dexter recalled. He had asked careful questions in Creston, and had received detailed and garrulous replies. The residents of the town had told him that several persons were suspected to have disappeared in the house. Some of Dexter's informants had claimed that the building was haunted, others that some sort of terrible spell or curse hung over it.

A couple of old men, however, had maintained that even before the house was built people had disappeared from the spot where it now stood. Perhaps, they had added, this was the reason why Martin Ballou, the owner of the house, had built it there in the first place. Martin Ballou, it seemed, was a strange man and had a reputation for doing strange things.

All this had been illuminating enough, but it hadn't satisfied Dexter's desire to know exactly what had happened to Stella. Little that was actually personal was involved. Stella—Dexter found himself thinking of her in the past tense—had been a heavy, regal-looking woman, with thick, platinum-white hair, which she wore arranged in an old-fashioned sort of style that was somehow in perfect keeping with her appearance. Like Dexter, she had possessed a cultured voice and manners, and had had no difficulty in passing herself off as a countess or a wealthy dowager. And like Dexter, she had been a highly successful confidence worker.

They had been partners in the bond swindle. Stella, however, had escaped the police and taken refuge in Creston, where, learning that Martin Ballou was a wealthy old bachelor seeking a combination secretary and nurse, she had applied for the job. She had been a superb actress, and it was natural that she should have been accepted.

Dexter crushed out the cigarette beneath his foot and looked more intently at the house, shimmering and misty beyond the wall. His dark eyes were thoughtful and hard. Had Stella slipped up somehow?

It didn't seem possible. In her letters to him she had written that matters were progressing smoothly enough. They had been clever letters, their contents arranged in such a way as to contain hidden information. It was by this means that she had told him about Martin Ballou and the house.

To judge from those letters, Ballou always had a large amount of ready cash available. He spent this freely. He had expensive tastes, and nothing, it seemed, was too good. Yet he did not deal with a bank or keep accounts. Stella had gradually realized that Ballou kept his money hidden somewhere in the house. She had set herself the task of finding it, certain that a sizeable fortune lay at the end of her quest. And once she had found it, she had intended to dispose of old Ballou. He was simply to have disappeared, as so many others had previously disappeared.

But that evidently had been Stella's fate instead. Her letters had abruptly stopped, and according to what Dexter had learned in Creston, she had ceased to exist.

He shrugged. He was more concerned about the money than about Stella. The money was still intact, still waiting to be found. Dexter's

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careful questions had assured him that old Ballou was still very much alive, and he had heard nothing to indicate that the man had been robbed.

Dexter moistened his lips in bleak yearning as he thought of the money. To a con man just out of prison, the money was the answer to every wish. Here was a job cased, planned, and begging to be pulled. He wouldn't need any working capital. He wouldn't have to waste any time lining up a sucker. All he had to do was get into Ballou's mysterious house.

And that was going to be easy. For he had learned in Creston—the thing that convinced him Stella had disappeared—that old Ballou was once again seeking a combination secretary and nurse.

Dexter intended to apply for the job. He had little doubt that he would be hired. Others were frightened away as soon as they heard the stories about the house in which Ballou lived, and the old man would be glad to accept anybody who came along.

* * *

STELLA had disappeared, but Dexter did not regard taking her place as a matter of courage alone. He was desperately in need of money and was willing to take almost any risk to obtain it—especially the sort of money Ballou reportedly had hidden. He intended to be more careful than Stella had been, to make certain that what had happened to her did not happen to him. If old Ballou had been able to survive the house this long, others could do the same.

Dexter straightened with abrupt purpose. He left the hill, descending the slope to the road level, and strode toward the stone wall. The gate proved to be open. The sinister reputation of the house obviously served to keep trespassers from entering.

Slipping through the gate, Dexter glanced around him. From here a gravel driveway, choked with weeds, ran directly to the house. On both sides of the driveway were trees, more weeds, and rank, untended grass.

Presently Dexter started up the driveway, picking his path carefully among the weeds. His lips curled in disgust as he contemplated the punishment his shoes and trouser cuffs were taking.

The house towered up before him as he approached. He entered the fog that seemed to hang over the building and found that it was not a fog at all, but some sort of an illusion. It seemed to consist of sections, for all the world like a number of enormous cloudy glass bowls intersecting each other in haphazard fashion. As he strode from one section to the other, he experienced strange sensations—a feeling of heaviness, first, then a dizziness, then an effect of thickness, as though he pushed his way through a transparent jelly. Again, as he passed through still another section, he felt oddly light, felt as though he could float in the air with no difficulty at all.

Dexter couldn't quite decide whether to feel frightened or just ordinarily puzzled. At any rate, the phenomena didn't seem to be harmful. He tightened his lips, thinking of Ballou's hidden fortune, and continued on.

A low flight of stone steps led up to the door, which was broad and constructed of heavy oak planks. Dexter found the bell button and pressed it, wondering as he did so if it actually operated. The unpainted, dilapidated condition of the house

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had given him doubts.

He waited. He mopped his face again, and then used the handkerchief to flick dust from his shoes and trouser cuffs. He straightened his tie and hat.

* * *

AFTER what seemed to Dexter a long time, the door slowly swung open. He found himself looking at a tall, bony-faced woman, who gazed back at him with a dull, strange lack of interest. She wore a frayed apron over a faded, old fashioned dress. Her nondescript hair was drawn in a prim knot at the back of her long, lean neck.

Dexter recognized the woman from Stella's letters. Her name, according to Stella, was Abigail. He recalled Stella having added that there was something wrong with Abigail's mind, though the woman was an efficient housekeeper and cook. He said carefully:

"I have come to see Mr. Ballou about the position he has open here. My name is Anthony Dexter." He didn't think it necessary to add that this was the alias he was currently using. In the past he had changed his name almost as often as he changed his shirts. He had been cautious enough to do so in the present instance, despite the fact that Stella had taken pains to see that Ballou didn't learn of the letters she wrote.

Nothing moved in Abigail's bony face. Thinking she had not understood him, Dexter repeated what he had said. Finally she gave a slow nod and motioned for him to enter.

He strode into a gloomy, large hall. Abigail closed the door and then moved out of sight into a room down the hall. After a moment she reappeared and beckoned.

Tense and more apprehensive than he cared to admit, Dexter strode in her direction. She motioned again, and he turned into a huge library, the curtains of which had been drawn. The only illumination was provided by a parchment-shaded lamp which stood on a great teakwood desk. Books lined the walls, tier after tier of books, rising up to the shadowed ceiling. At one side of the room was a tall fireplace, before which armchairs and endtables were arranged. A low fire burned, filling the air with a pungent scent.

Seated in a wheelchair before the desk was an old man, with shaggy white hair that fell disheveledly over a domed forehead. He had a yellowish, emaciated face in which black eyes burned with a feverish brightness. His body, in a wrinkled black suit, was stooped and gaunt, but there were indications that he had once been a big man.

Dexter needed nothing more to assure him that he was looking at Martin Ballou. Stella's descriptions had been deft and thorough. He donned a pleasant expression and approached with outstretched hand. Ballou's bony grasp was oddly hot and dry.

"You must pardon me for not rising," Ballou said gravely. "I'm not exactly a cripple, but the exertion required would be too much for me."

Dexter nodded quickly. "That's quite all right, I assure you." He sat down as Ballou indicated a chair beside the desk. He tried to look interested and sympathetic without seeming eager or servile.

Ballou shifted in the wheelchair. "I've been ill so long that I've grown accustomed to it. I have to be, you know. There's nothing our medical science can do. The disease I have isn't of earthly origin. I caught it on another—" Ballou's voice broke off. He shrugged slightly and glanced at the papers scattered over

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the surface of the desk. After a moment he said, "I understand you came to see me about a position, Mr. Dexter."

"Yes. I heard in Creston that you were looking for someone to serve as secretary and nurse."

"No doubt you heard other things as well. About this house, I mean."

"To be quite frank, I have."

"And yet you weren't frightened away?"

Dexter grinned and lifted one shoulder. "I don't believe everything I hear. I've learned that people have a habit of exaggerating."

Ballou shook his white mane slowly. "Perhaps, Mr. Dexter, you will be surprised to know that the people in Creston weren't exaggerating. This is a strange house. You certainly must have noticed that on your way here."

"I saw and felt some queer things—but I hardly regard them as supernatural. There must be some sort of a scientific explanation for them."

"There is, Mr. Dexter. I've known the explanation for a long time. In fact, it was because of this that I built the house here. The queer things you experienced really existed long before the house, you know."

Dexter nodded. "I heard something to that effect in Creston."

"I haven't tried to make a secret of it," Ballou said. He studied Dexter a moment, then leaned forward in the wheelchair, his black, too-bright eyes intent. "I like your level-headed attitude, Mr. Dexter. But there is something I don't understand. Why, precisely, did you apply for the position with me?"

"Because it's unusual," Dexter said calmly. "Because it offers a certain amount of novelty and excitement. And finally because of the possible salary involved. With your difficulty in obtaining help, it seemed to me that you would be willing to pay well."

Ballou smiled wryly. "Quite true. But didn't it occur to you that you might be exposing yourself to danger?"

"You have been exposed to the same danger for many years, Mr. Ballou—and you have survived it. I think I should be able to do the same."

Ballou looked pleased. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the wheelchair, as though the effort of leaning forward had been too much for him. Finally he looked at Dexter again. He said:

"Tell me about yourself, Mr. Dexter."

* * *

DEXTER spoke smoothly, basing his story on many real facts, but making up the greater part of it as he went along. He told of a college education, followed by a period as a newspaper reporter. This, he said, had led to his becoming foreign correspondent for a news service. He had visited most of the important spots in Europe and the Far East. On one of his tours he had become acquainted with a wealthy globe-trotter and had accepted an offer to become a professional companion. He had enjoyed this sort of work, and later, on his return to the States, had served as secretary to a succession of influential persons. He had come to Creston, he finished, because of an opening in a neighboring town, which he had decided not to accept. It was while in Creston that he had heard of the position with Ballou.

Dexter knew his story was convincing. As a confidence man, he'd had much practice in making even the most outrageous lies seem plausible.

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Ballou nodded in evident satisfaction. "You'll do, Mr. Dexter. In fact, you're just the sort of person I need. I prefer to have a man working for me anyway, as men know when to leave well enough alone. Women are much too curious—except, of course, for women in my housekeeper's mental condition. Curiosity in a house as this is dangerous."

"I take it," Dexter said, "that you are referring to the persons who are reported to have disappeared here."

"Not everyone has disappeared from *inside* the house," Ballou responded, shrugging. "But where the house is concerned, it must be kept in mind that there are some places where it is not safe to go. As long as one avoids those places, there is no danger. That's why I have survived this long."

Dexter carefully masked his disappointment. He had been hoping to learn something about Stella, but it seemed that Ballou didn't intend to volunteer information. Perhaps he would in time. Dexter told himself that he would have to be patient. It wouldn't be wise to ask too many questions at this early stage of the business.

He listened with a pretense of deep interest as Ballou outlined his new duties. He was relieved to learn that these wouldn't be difficult or exhausting. And the salary he was to receive proved to be surprisingly large. He was awed by the indication this gave of the extent of Ballou's hidden fortune. His determination to find it grew even greater.

Finally he rose to leave. He was to obtain his belongings in Creston and return to the house, where he would have dinner with Ballou that evening. The old man, it seemed, wanted him to begin his duties at once. This suited Dexter. The sooner he got started, the quicker Ballou's money would be in his hands.

He was in a jubilant mood as he returned to Creston. He did not even mind the film of dust that formed on his shoes and trouser cuffs.

* * *

AFTER a week Dexter was well settled in his duties at the house. Each morning he assisted Ballou to bathe and dress. Then he helped the old man into the wheelchair and pushed him to the head of the stairs, which led from the second floor to the first. Ascent and descent of the wheelchair was facilitated by a small elevator platform, which was raised and lowered along the stairway by means of a cable and crank arrangement.

Dexter had already noticed sinister possibilities in this device. It could be weakened in such a way as to send Ballou shooting down the stairs. An old man, and sick, he would never survive the fall. His death would be considered an unfortunate accident.

Dexter filed the idea away for future reference. The main thing for the present was to find where the old man's money was hidden.

Once they had reached the lower floor, Dexter and Ballou would have breakfast. Dexter found himself looking forward to each meal, for despite her mental short-comings Abigail was a remarkably good cook. She was an industrious and painstaking housekeeper as well. She kept to herself and seemed to spend all her waking hours in work of one kind or another.

After breakfast, Dexter would wheel Ballou into the library, where they would begin the day's tasks. This at first consisted of numerous letters and bills. In dealing with the latter, Dexter was given ample proof of Stella's claim that Ballou did not

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keep his funds in a bank. The old man produced the money in mysterious fashion, in cash, and in the large amounts that the bills required. Dexter concealed his excitement with an effort.

With the other details out of the way, Ballou began directing Dexter's assistance upon a project which was to prove their main occupation for the greater part of each day. Ballou, it became evident, was writing a series of books concerning a rather involved and perplexing subject called *The Plurality of Adjacent Space-Time Continua*. He had already completed a couple of volumes, though it appeared that he had made no effort as yet to get them published. Dexter wondered about that.

"The things you're writing about are fascinating, sir," he said one morning. "I don't understand why you aren't having them published somewhere."

Ballou shook his shaggy white mane slowly. "This subject is dynamite, Dexter. If published now, it would cause a horde of doubters and believers to descend on me overnight. I'm too old and too weak to be the center of such a whirlpool. These books will be published after my death—and not before. I intend to set aside sufficient funds for that purpose. Then the storm of pro and con may rage about this house as violently and as long as it pleases."

"About this house?" Dexter echoed, puzzled.

"Naturally," Ballou said. "This house is the center of everything I've been writing about. This house stands as concrete, living proof of every word. In the end, this house will silence every scoffer and start the biggest revolution in all scientific and human history. Remember the gold rushes of the past, Dexter? Well, they will be ripples in a puddle compared to this. For this, Dexter, will be a *world rush!*"

Dexter was more puzzled than ever. "Do you mean other worlds in the Universe, sir? But I don't see how anyone could reach them."

"I mean other worlds in *other* universes," Ballou said. "That is a distinction with a very great difference as regards reaching them."

Ballou did not seem disposed to pursue the matter further, and Dexter thought it wise to ask no more questions for the time being. It wouldn't do to be too curious.

Dexter followed this policy closely as the days passed. He kept his mouth closed and his eyes open. He didn't try to search for Ballou's hidden money. Until he knew more about the house, this would be too dangerous. Still vivid in his mind was the mystery of Stella's own disappearance.

He realized that Ballou was the only source of information about the house, and that only through the old man would he learn the things needed to guide him in his quest. He sought to ingratiate himself with Ballou to the point where the other's caution and reserve would break down.

ACCORDINGLY, he worked hard and sought to be as pleasant and helpful as he could without overdoing it. He pretended a deep sympathy and concern regarding Ballou's infirmities. When Ballou happened to be in a talkative mood—though, as it annoyingly happened, not on matters regarding the house—he listened with an outward display of intense interest.

Dexter despised chess, but in the evenings he frequently played the game with Ballou. They would arrange the pieces on a small table before the library fireplace and think

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out their moves amid a deep silence that gradually made Dexter want to scream and break furniture. The acting and the monotony were getting under his skin. He was growing impatient for a change of scene. If he didn't get hold of the money before much longer, he told himself, he'd go completely mad.

What kept him from attempting a drastic course of action was the fact that he was succeeding in ingratiating himself with Ballou. If the other had had any suspicions of him in the beginning, he now felt certain that they had vanished.

One afternoon Dexter made a mistake in some notes he was taking. Ballou corrected him and then sat for a moment in musing silence before he resumed work. Abruptly he said:

"Dexter, it has occurred to me that I've been keeping you in the dark as regards the house and the way in which it is connected with the work we've been doing. I now realize that this is hindering your efforts to help me. That isn't fair to you, for you've been a fine assistant in every way.

"You mustn't think me a secretive or suspicious old man. The truth is that the explanation for the house is completely incredible, and I didn't know how you would take it. I didn't want to frighten you away, or at the very least to give you serious doubts about my sanity. The house is proof of everything, but I feared to arouse your interest in it to the extent where you would want...well, to explore. There is danger in that, for it is how others had disappeared."

"I understand, sir," Dexter said, feeling a rising excitement. "I'm curious, of course, but not curious enough to risk my neck."

Ballou smiled. "Very well. I'll explain just why this house is so strange." He settled himself in the wheelchair and gazed ruminatively into distance. "The whole thing, Dexter, really goes back to the time when I was still quite a young man. I'd had an excellent scientific education, but I wasn't interested in any of the usual commercialized outlets for what I had learned. I could afford to do as I pleased, for I had inherited a considerable amount of money.

"What I wanted to do was to investigate the wide range of mysterious occurrences and phenomena which other scientists had been unable to explain and had therefore chosen to ignore. Why, I wanted to know, were there in numerous parts of the world spots where persons continually disappeared, or where weird physical effects took place? Why were these spots different? Why did things happen within them that went contrary to all scientific laws?

"It took me over thirty years to answer those questions. I traveled all over the world, frequently to places so remote that few white men had ever visited them. I witnessed dozens of incredible phenomena and carried out endless experiments. I formed and discarded one theory after another. Finally I settled here in Creston, because this was one of the few places in the world where a number of strange manifestations existed simultaneously. It was here that I discovered the key to the entire puzzle."

BALLOU leaned forward, his feverishly bright eyes glittering. "Dexter, each mysterious phenomenon I had seen did not follow laws that held good in all other parts of our world. Each followed laws of its own—and this because each was

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a manifestation of a *different world.* And by this I mean worlds co-existing with ours, in the same place, but in other orders of space-time.

"These other orders, or planes, are made possible by the fact that each possesses a different fundamental atomic vibration rate. Because of their different vibration rates, each world co-existing with ours remains unknown and intangible to the other—that is, under ideal conditions. Actually, the co-existing worlds are not perfectly superimposed, and as a result they cross or intersect. At these intersections there is a partial cancelling out of vibration rates. Where numerous co-existing worlds intersect in the same place, as here, this cancelling out process is even more extensive. Weak spots are formed in which the physical conditions of one world manifest themselves in the order, causing apparently inexplicable phenomena in each. If persons blunder into these weak spots, they...disappear. In other words, they pass through what is really a gateway to another plane."

"Don't they ever return?" Dexter asked.

"Very rarely—if ever," Ballou said. "The gateways are invisible, you know. That makes them hard to find, especially when one is frightened silly by what has happened."

"But I presume you have safely entered several of these gateways."

Ballou nodded. "I knew what I was dealing with, of course. I made preparations beforehand so that nothing would go wrong. This house was a major part of those preparations.

"You see, Dexter, I carefully mapped out the points where the different worlds intersected ours. I learned that they did not do so at the same levels. Some could be reached only by constructing tall ladders or platforms, but you may well imagine the amount of curiosity this would have aroused. The platforms would have been in plain view, and I couldn't very well have undertaken any explorations with a mob of townfolk watching. I finally hit upon the idea of building a house in this spot with the various rooms and floors coinciding with the different gateways. Allowing for this in the design resulted in a very odd-looking house.

"As for the other co-existing worlds I have visited, many are a lot like ours. Some are even more beautiful. A few contain intelligent life, though nothing like us in appearance, and not as highly developed. What will prove most interesting to the great majority of people on our world, however, is that the other co-existing worlds are treasure troves in the way of untapped natural resources. At first I myself was not above digging feverishly for such things as gold, silver, and precious gems. These have furnished me with more money than I'll ever be able to use."

Dexter's thoughts whirled. Gold... silver...precious gems! Why, Ballou must have several hundred thousands hidden away! He fought to conceal his eagerness as the old man spoke again.

"You may have noticed, Dexter, that most of the rooms in the house are kept locked. This is because they contain gateways and are not safe to enter without proper precautions. I had the locks installed after several persons disappeared in those rooms. I had warned them, naturally, but for one reason or another they chose to ignore it."

"But didn't you try to search for them?" Dexter asked.

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"How could I have known where to look?" Ballou countered. "There are many rooms, you know. In addition, the time rates of the other co-existing planes are different from our own. An hour here may be weeks in another plane. During that period, those who disappeared would get so far from the gateway that it would have required a large search party to find them."

Ballou shrugged, dismissing the subject. He straightened in the wheelchair. "Now that I've told you about the other planes, Dexter, perhaps you would like to see a few, if only as proof that what I have told you isn't a lot of nonsense."

Dexter rose eagerly. "I certainly would sir! That is," he added quickly, "if there's no danger."

"There is no danger connected with what I intend to show you," Ballou said with a smile of reassurance.

* * *

AT THE old man's directions, Dexter pushed the wheelchair from the library and to a locked door at the end of a long, crazily twisting hall on the first floor of the house. Ballou produced a ring of keys from his pocket, each key of which, Dexter noted, had been stamped with a number. Glancing at a number which had been painted in small letters on the door, Ballou selected a corresponding key. He unlocked the door and unhesitatingly wheeled himself into the room beyond.

Dexter watched, a sudden apprehension holding him motionless. He saw Ballou silhouetted in the light from a dusty window in the opposite wall of the room. The old man was moving toward it—and then, without warning, he was gone.

As Dexter stared, he heard Ballou calling him. The other's voice was faint, as though it came from a vast distance, or through a solid medium.

"Dexter! Come—step through. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Swallowing, his body cold and rigid, Dexter reluctantly approached the spot where he had last seen Ballou. The window was directly before him, the empty room solid and real on all sides. He could see no evidence of the opening between worlds into which Ballou had vanished. It seemed incredible that there could be such an opening.

Dexter took one slow step after another, his hand outstretched before him, like one who gropes for obstructions in a dark room. He felt nothing—until, abruptly, the floor seemed to sink beneath him and a wrenching sensation gripped his body.

In the next instant the window he had seen before him was gone. The room was gone. He found himself standing on a stretch of knee-high grass that was an odd bright-green in color. Overhead was a cloudless, vivid blue sky, and on all sides was a breath-taking mountain vista that spread as far as the eye could reach.

Seated in the wheelchair several feet away, Ballou was smiling in amusement. "Well, Dexter, do you still have any doubts?"

Dexter shook his head slowly, awed. "Where...where are we?" he asked.

"On another co-existing world, of course," Ballou said. "Did you feel a sort of twisting an instant before you found yourself here? That was due to the atoms of your body adjusting themselves to the different vibration rate of this plane. Without that adjustment it would not be possible for us to exist here."

"And we adjust to our former rate when we return?" Dexter said.

"Naturally." Ballou glanced about for a moment, then gestured. "Well, Dexter, we had better go back. There

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is much more to see, you know."

They reached the room on the other side of the gateway without difficulty. Ballou seemed to possess an unerring sense of direction.

* * *

GUIDED by the old man, Dexter pushed the wheelchair to other rooms on different floors of the house. Their progress led through halls that slanted or tilted weirdly, up stairways that were grotesquely distorted and somehow always much longer or shorter than the height of the floors they ran to. As he passed through the different parts of the house, Dexter experienced a variety of queer sensations. A feeling of unnatural heaviness would be followed by one of sudden vertigo, as though, momentarily, the house were whirling about him. Then he would seem to be floating in the air, or, later, pushing his way through an invisible resisting medium as dense as water.

His glimpses of the worlds that existed beyond the various rooms held him spellbound. Once he stood on a strip of rocky beach against which beat the waves of an unknown sea, while all around him enormous cliffs towered up into the dark sky, where three great moons shone brightly. Later he found himself in the midst of a hot, lush jungle where the vegetation was a lurid crimson, and the sky, visible in patches through intervening tiers of huge leaves and boughs, was a brilliant emerald-green. He and Ballou left hastily when a gigantic, scaled reptile appeared and began lumbering in their direction.

One other scene remained fixed in Dexter's memory. Emerging from a different gateway, he found himself, with Ballou, on a long road paved with crudely-hewn blocks of stone. At one end of it was what seemed to be a walled town, also of stone The town appeared to be under seige, for it was surrounded by a horde of shouting, milling figures, dimly discernable through the purple dusk that hung over the scene. Fires burned in the town, and the screams of its inhabitants mingled with the crash and clatter of battle.

There was a savage and utterly alien quality about the proceedings that chilled Dexter, He was glad to leave when Ballou suggested it. The old man feared that other denizens of that particular world might appear along the road should he and Dexter remain too long.

"I think we have done enough sight-seeing for the present, Dexter," Ballou said, after they had returned to the house. "I'm not well, you know, and these trips are exhausting. Some other time we'll visit the remaining rooms—those that are safe, that is."

Dexter nodded, watching as Ballou locked the door of the room they had left and replaced the ring of keys in his pocket. Then he wheeled the old man back to the library, thinking of the other planes he had seen. A sudden realization struck into him. All along he had been wondering where Ballou kept his money hidden. Now he thought he knew.

On one of those other planes, of course. This was much safer than hiding the money in some more obvious place within the house itself.

But which plane? That was something he had still to learn—and he knew how it could be accomplished. He had only to get his hands on the ring of keys. Then he could visit the other planes into which he and Ballou had not yet gone. Most likely the old man had a cache on one of them. It wouldn't be far from the

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gateway that led to it, and there would be visible evidences that Ballou visited it frequently.

Determination hardened in Dexter. He told himself he would wait until Ballou slept. Then he would go to the old man's room and steal the keys.

With the end of his quest now almost in sight, Dexter seethed with impatience. It seemed that night would never come. But at last Ballou laid aside the book he had been reading and announced that he was going to bed.

Dexter wheeled the old man to his room and helped him to undress. He noted that the keys were left in Ballou's coat, which he hung in the closet. He didn't dare remove them then, fearing to make a betraying noise.

* * *

FINALLY he said good-night to Ballou and went to his own room. He lighted a cigarette and sat down on the bed to wait. It wasn't until almost two hours had passed that Dexter felt certain Ballou was asleep. He returned to the old man's room. Moving stealthily through the darkness, he went to the closet and carefully removed the ring of keys from Ballou's coat.

He hurried back to the door. In his eagerness to begin the search, he forgot caution. He blundered into a table, which went crashing to the floor.

While Dexter stood rigid with dismay, there was the creaking of bedsprings. Light from a bedside lamp abruptly flooded the room. Ballou, his hand on the lamp switch, blinked at Dexter in perplexity.

"Why...Dexter! What is the matter?" And then the old man's probing gaze settled upon the keys clutched in Dexter's hand. A frown of swift suspicion appeared on his gaunt face. "Dexter—you took the keys! What were you trying to do?"

Frantically Dexter sought for an excuse. Even in this emergency his long training in glib falsehoods did not desert him. "I thought I heard a noise in one of the locked rooms down the hall," he said, launching into a smooth improvisation. "It worried me. I thought someone who had disappeared might have found his way back. The idea seemed rather far-fetched, and so I decided not to awaken you."

Ballou fingered his jaw thoughtfully. "It's possible," he said. "But, Dexter, you would have been taking a considerable risk. You might accidently have gone through one of the dangerous gateways. After this just ignore any noises you hear." He extended his hand. "The keys, Dexter. Give them to me."

A black anger rose in Dexter. He told himself he wouldn't be thwarted so easily after he had come this far. Yet a sudden cunning kept him from refusing outright to turn over the keys.

He went over to the bed with a rueful grin. "I didn't intend to do anything wrong, sir. I'll admit I was impulsive, but I hope you won't overlook the possibility that it may sometime be necessary for me to go through the gateways for one reason or another. It might be a wise precaution to know which are dangerous."

"True," Ballou said, nodding slowly. He hesitated, then searched among the keys and held one out. "The gateway in this particular room must be avoided at all costs, Dexter. I'll give you a list of the others later."

Dexter bent to peer at the number on the key. Eleven. It was with an effort that he kept a grin of triumph from showing on his face. He knew

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why Ballou was warning him away from this room—because it was beyond the gateway within it that the old man had his money hidden.

All the impatience of the past weeks surged over Dexter in an overpowering wave. Why wait any longer? Why go on with the pretense? The keys were just within reach. All he had to do—

His expression must have warned Ballou. The old man stiffened and his mouth opened for a scream. But almost in the same instant Dexter leaped forward, his hands closing on Ballou's throat.

Old and weak, Ballou did not put up much of a struggle before he died.

Then Dexter straightened, breathing hard. He listened intently for a moment, thinking of Abigail. But the house was quiet. It was evident that Abigail remained unaware of what had happened.

Dexter returned his attention to Ballou. Disposing of the old man would be no problem. He would simply wheel Ballou into one of the gateways. Ballou would thus disappear, a fact which would surprise no one in Creston, considering the sinister reputation of the house. Dexter would disappear, too, in a different way. He would have nothing to fear. It would be impossible to prove that he had murdered Ballou.

He took the keys from where they had fallen and slipped from the room. In the hall he listened again. The quietness of the house remained unbroken. Finally, with an anticipatory grin, he hurried to the door with the number eleven painted on it.

The room beyond was pitch black. Dexter searched for his matches, struck one, and peered at the dust-covered floor. Elation roared through him. There were wheel marks in the dust, a large number of them, indicating that Ballou had been a frequent visitor to this room.

But there was something else as well. A bolt had been fixed to the floor, and tied to this was a length of rope that disappeared into nothingness several feet away.

Dexter's grin broadened. A complete giveaway! The rope led to Ballou's cache, of course.

* * *

TRIUMPH bubbled like wine in Dexter's veins. The money was as good as in his hands right now. Ahead of him lay a life of luxury and ease. He would assume another name and become a man of culture in fact. He wouldn't have to take risks any longer. He wouldn't have to act and pretend.

The match burned his fingers, recalling him to the task at hand. He lighted another and followed the rope to the point where it disappeared. Without warning a sudden dizziness seized him, but it was a familiar sensation now, and he was not alarmed. He knew he was going through the gateway.

And then something happened that he hadn't expected. He fell. And kept falling. He seemed to fall for a long time. Then he hit—water.

It closed about him, dark and cold, and he shot down and down. Water filled his eyes, his ears, his mouth, emphasizing with its socking wetness the horror that flamed in his mind. He flailed frantically with arms and legs, and slowly he began to rise.

He broke surface, gulping down great breaths of cold, damp air. Paddling water, he glanced about him.

There was very little to see. A vast, gray ocean spread everywhere he looked, meeting at the far horizon the gray sky overhead.

Despair spread like a terrible sickness through Dexter. No land. Noth-

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 71

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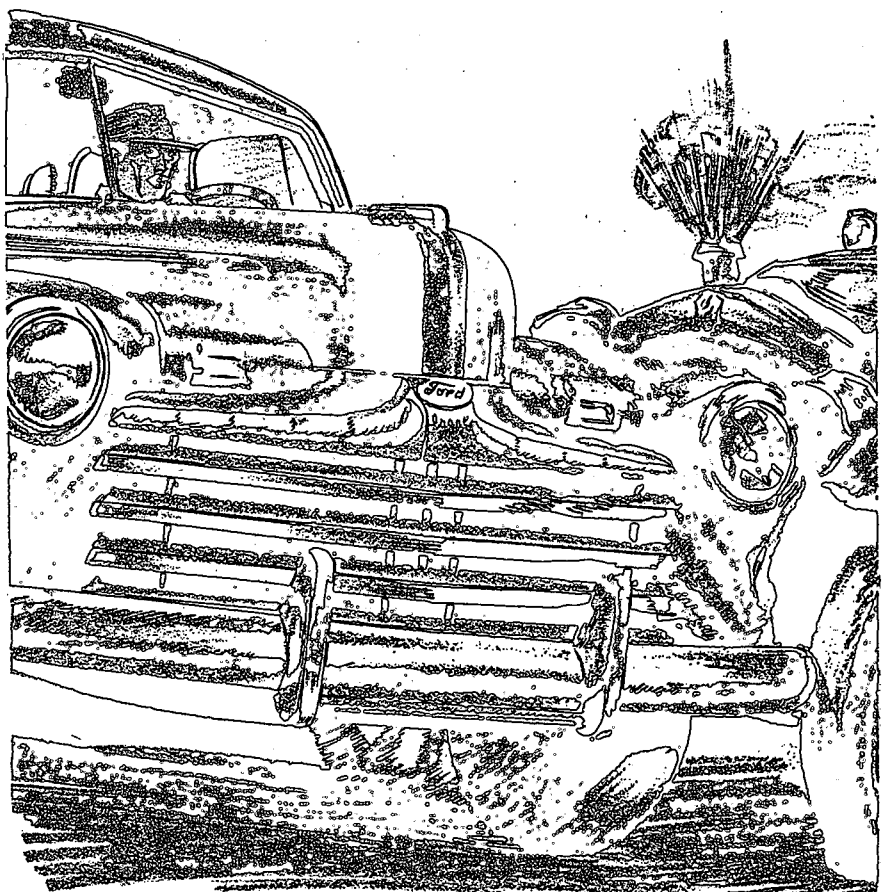
Window To The Future

By PETER WORTH

There was only one piece of glass like it; which was a good thing, because what happened to those who bought sections of it was awful!



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"THAT'S the third time that window's been broken in the past year!" George Saunders said testily. "That does it. It may cost a little more, but I'm going to have shatter-proof glass put in this time."

"I wish you would, darling," Mary Saunders said to her husband. "I get tired of it too."

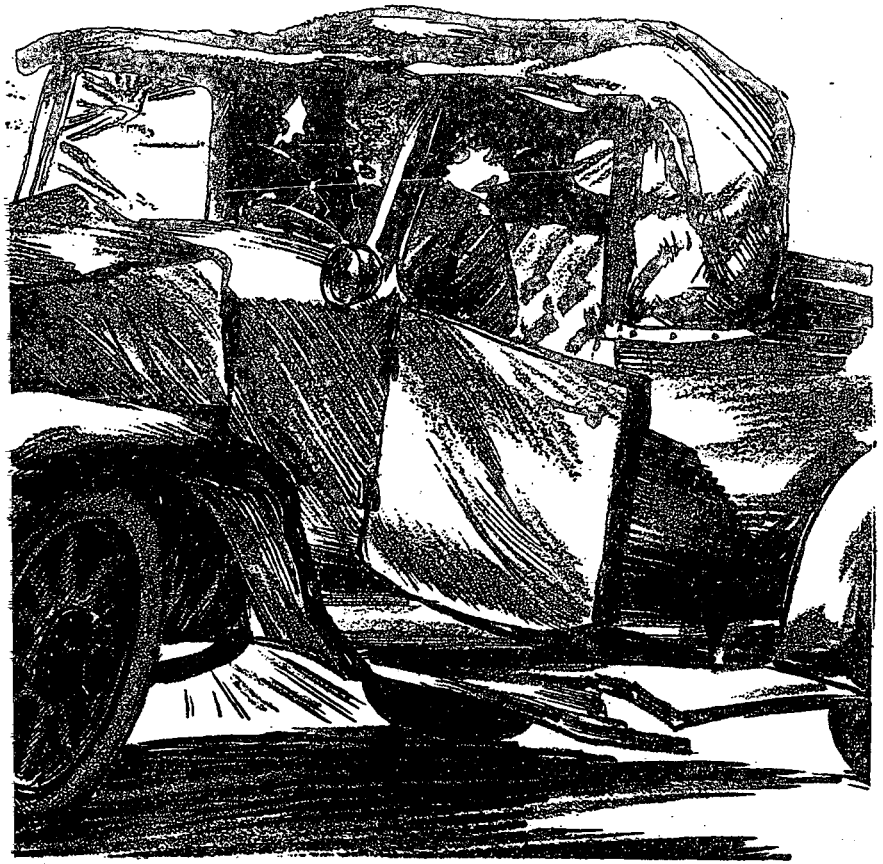
"Let's see—" George thumbed through the directory. "Acme Glass Company—Devon three, four oh oh oh."

"Acme Glass Company," a male voice answered. "Mr. Schultz speaking . . ."

* * *

"Well now," Professor Blackstone stepped back to admire his carpenter work, chewing thoughtfully at his moustache, "I do believe it's ready for the glass."

"Yes, Professor Blackstone," the sixteen-year-old assistant agreed dutifully. He looked sourly at the opening in the wall between the two rooms—the laboratory, and Professor Blackstone's private office. He knew the sole reason



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for the window going in was to enable the professor to see that he kept working.

"Let's see now," the professor said, thumbing through the directory. "Acme Glass Company . . ."

* * *

"Hello? Acme Glass Company? This is Gerald Peters. Got my windshield put in yet?"

"Just a minute, Mr. Peters," Rollo Fields said, thumbing through the pile of orders on the desk. "Yes, it's ready."

"Fine. I'll be right over to get my car."

"That another order?" Bill Harper asked, sticking his head in the doorway.

"No, Bill," Rollo said. "Just Peters asking about his windshield. You ready with those two orders on the south side?"

"Yeah. All ready to go."

"Well, what's keeping you?"

"The Acme Glass Company," Bill answered. "Otherwise I'd starve."

"That's the spirit," Rollo said. "You cut the pieces out of that sheet that was broken?"

"Yeah," Bill answered. "Guess that's all we can salvage from it. Sure funny about that. I'd have sworn the way was clear when I carried it from the store room. I was looking right through it and didn't see that handtruck setting there."

He ducked out of the doorway and went to the company truck, whistling mournfully. He decided to go to the Saunders' place first, and climbed into the truck.

"HERE'S your receipt, Mr. Peters," Rollo Fields said politely. "Send it to your insurance company and they'll reimburse you in full."

"Thanks." Gerald Peters folded the receipt carefully and shoved it in his coat pocket.

He left the Acme Glass Company office and found his car at the side of the building waiting for him. Behind the wheel he admired the glistening transparency of the new windshield. No more scratches that wore out windshield swipes.

With a smile at his inner secret of having broken the old windshield with a hammer in order to get a new one on his insurance, he stepped on the starter.

He stopped where the parking lot let out to the street while a car passed in front of his windshield. He stopped rather abruptly, because he had looked and the street seemed clear. Then suddenly this car was in front of his windshield and he had to jam his brakes to keep from hitting it.

"Funny how they always sneak up on you," he muttered to no one in particular, easing out cautiously.

He turned north. A car was just ahead of him, forcing him to slow down. He tried to get around it for three blocks, but cars were coming toward him and forced him back behind the slow poke.

A siren sounded behind him. He looked back. It was a police car signalling him to the curb. Wondering what the trouble was, Gerald Peters pulled into the curb and stopped.

The police officer leaned in the window and asked to see his driver's license, his eyes looking over the interior of the car suspiciously.

Obediently Gerald took out his billfold and opened it to his driver's license. The officer looked at it, grunted, and straightened up.

"Been drinking recently?" he asked.

"No sir," Gerald Peters answered. "I never drink this early in the morning."

"Feel all right?" the officer asked sympathetically.

"Never felt better," Gerald answered cheerfully.

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"Then why in blazes don't you drive sensibly and stop acting like a kid in a jalopy?" the officer shouted, dropping his pretended politeness. "I watched you for three blocks. Of all the dumb idiots I've seen drive a car—what do you think it is, a bicycle?"

"I was driving sensibly," Gerald said, annoyed. "Are you sure YOU haven't been drinking?"

"SENSIBLY!" the officer snorted. "Do you call darting all over a clear street, spurting and braking, and honking your horn at nothing SENSIBLE?"

"What do you mean—nothing?" Gerald said, showing his teeth in what he could later testify was a polite smile—if it were necessary. "I was trying to get around that slow car ahead of me."

"There wasn't no car," the officer said with exaggerated patience. "You were all alone. I ought to give you a ticket for reckless driving but I won't. I feel sorry for you. Now get going, sonny, or I'll give you a ticket for parking by a fire plug—and I'll be having my eye on you, so drive like an adult for a few blocks, will you? Get going before I change my mind and take you down to the station for a mental checkup."

He took his foot off the running board and went back to his car. Gerald Peters watched him, an angry glint in his eye, then shrugged his shoulders.

The street ahead was clear now. A block and a half away the light had just turned green. Gerald Peters stepped down firmly on the throttle to catch the light before it changed.

The light changed to yellow just as he reached it. Too late to stop gracefully, he pushed the foot throttle to the floor to get across in time. There were no cars. The way was perfectly clear . . .

Then he heard his wife, Alice, say, "Run tell the nurse he's coming to, Sisty."

He opened his eyes and saw he was in a hospital bed, and Alice, dark circles under her eyes, was looking at him anxiously.

"FIRST one I ever met that was out and out crazy," Officer Shelby said to Officer Browne between bites of hamburger. "First I see him pull out of the parking lot at the Acme Glass Company. He acts kind of funny even then, stopping his car abruptly like someone was in front of him when there wasn't. Then he starts down the street, going slow, and a couple of times he darts over to the left side of the street, then slows down and pulls back. There ain't a soul on the street, either.

"Finally he toots his horn several times. I signal him down and give him the riot act. He ain't drunk. His eyes are normal, so he ain't doped. I should have taken him in, I guess. Instead I let him go—and a block and a half later he runs full speed into heavy cross traffic through a red light like he's trying to commit suicide. When I catch up he's out like a light and his windshield's shattered—not to mention the whole side of his car and a couple of other cars that ran into him."

BILL HARPER tapped the last inch of putty into place, dropped his putty knife in his pocket, and rapped on the door. George Saunders opened the door, a piece of toast in his mouth, a briefcase in one hand, and his other arm struggling into the sleeve of his coat.

"Mm wuf wole tuck curf ut," he mumbled through the toast. He paused while he finished struggling into his coat to inspect the new window. It was slightly mussed with fingerprints, and had a new look to it.

He looked through it into the living

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room. His wife, Mary, came to the door with her purse and was searching through it for her billfold.

Suddenly George Saunders' eyebrows lifted in surprise. Though Mary was standing in the doorway fumbling in her purse and talking to the glass man, she seemed to be in the living room, real as life.

George shook his head violently to clear his brain, and looked again. It was no delusion—too vivid and detailed. She was running the vacuum on the rug. Her mouth was open and moving like she was singing, but no sound came.

"That proves it," George thought to himself. "Delusion anyway."

Suddenly she looked up, looking right at him. Recognition lit up on her face. She dropped the vacuum cleaner wand and started toward him, then seemed to trip over the hose and fall. Her head hit the coffee table viciously.

"Mfsltsk!" George said, struggling to swallow his toast.

"Did you say something, darling?" Mary asked, pausing in counting out the money to Bill Harper.

Bill's eyes turned from the window and settled on her. They had seemed wild, but now they became calm. They turned to the new window again, blinked, and turned back to her.

"Nothing," he said. "Only be careful with your work today, sweetheart. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

He kissed her over Bill Harper's shoulder and hurried down the steps.

At the corner he caught up with Lester Jones who always caught the same bus with him.

"Morning, Les," he said.

"Mornin' George," Les answered.

They walked along in silence. There was a worried frown on George's face. Lester Jones noticed it but didn't remark about it. On the bus they found an empty seat for a change and sat down together.

"D'you believe in premonitions?" George asked suddenly.

"Well—maybe," Les answered. He was going to say no, but decided if he did George would shut up, and his premonition might help pass the time.

"Well, yesterday I myself would have said no," George said, taking the half agreement to be an invitation to talk about it. "This morning when I got up I would have said no. At breakfast I would have said no."

"Yeah?" Les said invitingly.

"But now—" George hesitated. "When I was leaving the house this morning and my wife was standing in the doorway I glanced through the window to the living room and saw her in there just as real as life."

"No kiddin'!" Les said encouragingly.

"Funny," George said thoughtfully. "It was just as real as if she were really there. If she hadn't been standing right there in the front doorway I would swear she was in the living room."

"Yeah?" Les prompted.

"Suddenly she looked up and saw me," George went on. "I mean she in the living room—you know what I mean. Anyway, she saw me and started toward the window. Then she fell over the vacuum hose and hit her head on the coffee table. It was as real as life—but she was standing right there in the doorway all the time."

"Yeah," Les said gravely. "That sounds like a premonition, all right—a real genuine premonition. You should have warned her."

"I did," George said.

"That's good," Les said, watching the street go by through the window. After a block he added absently, "Only if it's a genuine premonition it'll happen anyway, in spite of warning her."

"You really think so?" George asked

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anxiously.

"If it was a genuine premonition," Les said authoritatively. "Of course, if it was only a pipe dream—"

"Maybe I should go back home and sort of watch out for her today, huh?" George suggested.

"Might be a good idea," Les agreed, turning his head to watch the street go by some more. "Only," he said after a block, "it might not be going to happen for a week, and you can't stay home for a week waiting for it to happen."

"Yeah," George said, worried. "Yeah. Maybe you're right. I warned her. Anyway—things don't happen that way, do they? I mean, you can't actually see the future like that—vivid. It must have been just a pipe dream."

"Probably," Les dismissed the subject.

"MR. BLACKSTONE in?" Bill Harper asked the sixteen-year-old boy who answered his knock.

"No," the boy answered. "He went out for a couple of hours. Want to wait?"

"I'm from the Acme Glass Company," Bill explained.

"Oh," the boy said. "Bring the glass in. The professor left the money for it with me—said to be sure and get a receipt."

Bill grunted. A few moments later he climbed back up the stairs with the two and a half by five foot pane. The boy held the door open for him and silently pointed to the rectangular opening in the wall, then stood back with his hands in his pockets to watch.

"What's your name, kid?" Bill Harper asked as he slipped the pane into position. He nodded his head in satisfaction at the perfect fit. So many amateur carpenters got the dimensions right but didn't get the opening square, so that sometimes a half-hour was wasted trimming the glass to fit.

"Orville Sturn," the boy answered. "What's yours?"

"Bill Harper," Bill said. "How much money do you make working for the professor?"

"Fifty a week," Orville lied.

"Oh," Bill said. "Then you wouldn't be interested." He started nailing in the narrow strip that was to hold the pane in place.

"Interested in what?" Orville asked.

"Oh, we need a young man at the plant," Bill said. "But the salary's only forty a week."

"Forty a week!" Orville exclaimed in dismay.

"Yeah," Bill said, deadpan.

"Well, look," Orville said miserably, trying to get around his lie. "I—I've been thinking about a change. No future for me here. I'd be willing to—well, take a ten dollar cut in my salary to get a position with a future to it."

"Not much future," Bill said. "You can work up to my job if I quit or die—and make sixty bucks a week."

He glanced through the glass into the other room. A mouse of a man with a starved moustache had just entered and gone over to the desk.

"That's the professor," Orville explained.

Through the glass they saw Professor Blackstone look up and notice them for the first time. He rose hastily from his desk and started toward the door.

Bill and Orville turned to the door and waited. It didn't open. They looked through the window again. The office was empty.

"That's funny," Orville said. "And how did he get in there in the first place? There's only the one door. And how did he get out?" He scratched his unruly blond head absently.

"Well, he got in and got out," Bill said. "It doesn't matter, since you have

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the money. Here's the bill. Fourteen dollars and thirty-seven cents."

Orville carefully counted it out, his eyes returning to the other office through the new pane of glass now and then in puzzlement.

Bill Harper signed the bill and pocketed the money. He had forgotten about his subtle ribbing of the teenager who was obviously not worth more than twenty a week of any man's money, he had discerned.

As he descended the stairs to the street he sighed with relief.

"That jinx pane of glass is gone for good," he mumbled. "Hope I never see another like it." With that he dismissed it from his mind.

NOT so, Orville Sturn. When Bill Harper left he turned his eyes to the other room. Through the pane of glass he saw the professor enter the room again, though he had not gone in through the only door into that room.

The professor turned his head and looked through the glass with a studious expression on his thin face. He paused and fixed Orville with a stern gaze.

Suddenly the professor ran toward the door as if he were going to come into the lab. The door didn't open. In a few seconds he appeared again through the glass.

He looked thoughtfully at Orville. Without warning he jumped toward the glass, making a horrible face and opening his mouth as if he were shouting—but no noise sounded from the office.

Orville jumped back in alarm. This seemed to amuse the professor. He paused in the center of the other room, scratching his chin absently, apparently thinking something over in his mind.

Orville became uncomfortable. With the professor looking he should be working. He half turned to start his work again. A spark of defiance rose in him.

He turned back and went to the door to the professor's office. The professor's eyes followed him. Orville determinedly opened the door and stepped inside.

The room was empty! Ready to turn and run, wondering where the professor could have hidden, Orville advanced into the room. He reached the center of the room and looked around.

"There's absolutely no place he could hide," he said aloud. "He isn't here."

He turned to the new pane of glass and looked through. His eyes widened in stupefied amazement. With a terrified squawk he ran from the room. Taking the steps two, three, and four at a time, he half-fell down the three flights to the street level.

At the street door he bumped into the professor who was just entering, and knocked him down. His wild eyes came into focus temporarily and saw who he had bumped into.

"The professor!" he said desperately. Then he was running down the street as fast as he could go.

"I wonder what's got into him?" Professor Blackstone mumbled, picking himself up off the steps. "I think I'll fire him when he comes back."

After he had picked up his packages he slowly climbed the stairs to his laboratory, chewing thoughtfully on his pale moustache, previewing in his mind the lecture he intended to give to Orville when he dismissed him from his employment.

The laboratory door was wide open.

"That's another thing," Professor Blackstone muttered. "Leaving without locking the door. Any street thief could come in and steal thousands of dollars worth of equipment."

He closed the door after himself as he went in. Crossing the large room he laid the packages on a bench. Then, for the first time, he noticed the pane

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of glass in the opening he had made for it.

With a cluck of satisfaction he crossed over to it to examine it and see how well it fit. Not looking through it at first, he examined the wooden strip that held the pane in place.

"Nice job," he said aloud.

He raised his eyes to look into his inner office. He drew in his breath sharply. The hair on the back of his neck rose away from his scalp. His mouth dropped open, slack.

There was a man sitting at his own private desk, bent over, writing furiously on some paper. As Professor Blackstone stared, the man at his desk looked up from his work and turned his head to look through the window. The man inside was Professor Blackstone!

"Hey! You're me!" Professor Blackstone said to the man in his office. The Professor Blackstone in the office nodded his head and grinned broadly. Something seemed to strike him funny. He pointed at the professor and laughed. From all appearances the laugh was loud, yet no sound came from the office through the open door.

The hair on the back of the professor's neck was lying down again, now that the first shock was over.

"How can I be in there and out here at the same time?" he asked himself. Himself inside the office was still doubled over with laughter. It became infectious. Professor Blackstone chuckled.

Already he was beginning to suspect the answer. He went to the door and looked into the office. No one was there. He had not expected anyone to be there, least of all himself.

He entered the office and looked out through the window in the connecting wall of the two rooms. He didn't expect anyone to be there and was surprised to see Orville sitting on the bench by the sink, smoking a cigaret.

Frowning in anger he went to the door and looked out into the laboratory. It was empty.

"Of course," Professor Blackstone said, nodding his head. "That clinches it. What a wonderful discovery."

He turned back into his office and went to his desk. Soon he was scribbling notes on paper, lost to the world around him. The pile of notes grew steadily . . .

* * *

"LOOK Mary," George Saunders said into the phone. "Are you sure you're all right, honey?"

"Of course, darling," Mary answered. "What's come over you? You've called me and asked that same question three times in the last two hours. What's the matter, honey?" Her voice was soft, sentimental, slightly affected by the contagion of his worry.

"Nothing," George said gruffly. "Nothing. Only be very careful when you're vacuuming today. Maybe you'd better skip vacuuming, huh?"

"I can't," Mary said firmly. "We're having the Humphreys over tonight. I have to get the house cleaned up. You know that."

"Yeh, yeh," George said soothingly. "But couldn't you use the hand vacuum instead?"

"No," Mary pouted over the phone. "It's three times as much work."

"Please," George pleaded. "Just this once. Huh?"

"Well—" Mary hesitated. "All right. Just this once, maybe."

"Gee, that's great," George said happily. "Now I won't need to worry. G'bye, honey."

Mary made a face at the phone as she heard George hang up. It pleased her that he was so worried about her, even though it vaguely disturbed her. He had never been like that before, and he

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seemed determined to make up for it all at once in senseless worry.

"A little white lie won't hurt me," she said to herself, "if it makes George stop worrying. I have no intention of using the hand vacuum. It would take hours instead of minutes to clean all the rugs with it."

She had intended waiting until afternoon to do the vacuuming, but with all the fuss she decided to do it right away. She started in on the bedroom rug. She found herself being jittery in spite of herself.

A half-hour later she was slowly transferring her jitteriness to anger toward George. When the phone rang again, for the fourth time that morning, she dropped the vacuuming wand and marched to the phone.

"How ya comin', honey?" George's voice sounded, meekly apologetic.

"Now listen here, George Saunders," Mary said angrily. "If you think I have nothing more to do than answer this phone all morning—"

"Why didn't you answer right away?" George cut in hastily. "The phone rang so long before you answered that I was worried."

"Worry worry worry," Mary said disgustedly. "If you must know, I didn't hear it because I was using the vacuum cleaner. What's more, I'm going to go on using it. And if you call up again this morning I'll—I'll—YOU—!"

She banged down the receiver, nodded her head in a "that'll hold you for awhile" gesture, and stalked back to the living room to begin her vacuuming there.

"OHMIGOD," George prayed desperately. "Let me out of here. She's using the vacuum cleaner."

He got up and went toward the boss' office with a wild gleam in his eye.

"What do you want?" Alvin B. Schwartztod said, glaring up from his work.

"My wife just had a serious accident," George said. "I've got to get home right away."

"That's too bad," Mr. Schwartztod said, his eyes relenting somewhat. "How'd it happen?"

"She—she tripped over the vacuum cleaner," George said. "She's lying there now—unconscious. I've got to go to her."

"If she's unconscious how did you learn about it?" Mr. Alvin B. Schwartztod asked suspiciously.

"S—someone saw her through the window on the front porch and just called me," George said, half-truthfully.

"Well—" Mr. Schwartztod hesitated.

"Gee, thanks," George said gratefully. Waiting for no more he dashed out of the room and through the office.

A taxi was cruising past on the street. He hailed it and glared worriedly ahead all the way out to his house.

"Wait a minute," he said over his shoulder, leaping from the cab the moment it stopped.

He ran up the walk and looked in through the window that the Acme Gass Company had installed that morning. The vacuum cleaner was there, but there was no sign of his wife.

"Thank God," he said, wilting with relief. He took out his keys and unlocked the door quietly. Pushing the door open he stepped inside.

"Ohmigod!" he moaned as he sank to the floor beside the unconscious form of his wife. She was exactly as he had seen her that morning through the window.

Picking her up he staggered to the door.

"Help!" he yelled wildly to the taxi driver. The driver, keeping his head,

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closed the front door of the house before helping George with his unconscious burden.

"To the hospital!" George ordered unnecessarily as the car got in motion.

* * *

"YOU must leave now, Mrs. Peters," the nurse said respectfully. "You can come back for an hour this afternoon."

"All right," Alice Peters said. "Come on, Sisty." She paused half-way to the door. "You're sure the light was green and there weren't any cars, Jerry?" she asked anxiously.

"I'd swear it on my deathbed," Gerald Peters said solemnly.

"I believe you, darling," Alice Peters said in a tone of voice that implied she knew no one else would.

Outside the hospital room door she nearly bumped into a uniformed policeman.

"Humph," she said icily. "If he escapes before they knit his broken leg I'll bet you'll lose your job."

The policeman opened his mouth, then shut it again, wisely. His face was slightly red as he watched the backs of the woman and ten-year-old girl march coldly down the hall.

Two internes with a stretcher on wheels appeared and paused at the door.

"She gone?" one of them asked. The policeman nodded.

"Funny case," the other interne said with professional maturity that belied his appearance. "No alcohol in the blood, no signs of drugs. Apparently normal." He shrugged his shoulders to indicate that professional ethics sealed his lips on any further disclosure.

They pushed the stretcher into the room. Shortly they wheeled it back out. The policeman listened admiringly to the smooth flow of warm, quiet profanity coming from the lips of the white-faced Gerald Peters.

"It may have been temporary insanity," he muttered as the stretcher and its burden disappeared through the elevator doors at the end of the hall. "He's perfectly normal now."

* * *

PROFESSOR Blackstone glanced up from his scribbling. The complex equations and chemical formulae he had written on page after page may have been meaningless, even to him; but he now had a comprehensive grasp of the essential factors.

Orville Sturn, seen through the glass, had hastily flushed his third cigaret down the sink drain and was crossing the lab to the door. The professor watched his progress, amused.

When he opened the door a stranger entered and talked to him for a moment. The stranger left, and returned a few minutes later carrying a rectangular pane of glass.

Professor Blackstone decided it would be wiser to leave and come back later. He went out into the lab and started to unwrap the packages he had laid on the work counter.

"There's no way to know when the man finished from out here," he said to himself. He waited until he thought the coast would be clear, then went back into his office and crossed to the desk. He sat down and started to glance over his last page of figures, then glanced up and saw Orville and the stranger staring at him through the glass. He rose hastily and left the room.

In the lab he put the bottles of chemicals on a shelf, then returned to his office. Half-way to his desk he turned and saw Orville, alone, staring at him through the glass.

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He paused and fixed the boy with a stern, reprimanding gaze. He saw Orville begin to wilt in superstitious uncertainty.

"I'll scare the daylights out of him," the professor thought. He ran toward the door, as if he intended to rush out. Pausing a moment he went back to where he could see Orville.

The boy was standing there, a worried look on his face. The professor jumped at the glass, waving his hands violently, shouting. He was highly amused when Orville instinctively jumped back.

He stepped backward to the center of the office again and paused, scratching his chin absently, wondering what he should do next. Orville watched him uncomfortably a moment, then turned away, as if to go back to his work. But suddenly he turned, a defiant expression on his face, and headed toward the office door.

"Oho!" Professor Blackstone whispered. He stepped over to where he could watch the lab from the office to the hall door. Almost immediately he saw Orville run to the hall door, his legs working like pistons. "Just as I guessed," he nodded in self-satisfaction. "He saw himself out in the lab when he was in my office. It scared the wits out of him."

Chuckling, he sat down at the desk and started in on his figuring again. In a few seconds he was lost in his work. Less than five minutes later he felt eyes boring into his back. He turned his head. Recollection of this scene from the other side of the glass four hours before caused him to grin.

"Hey! You're me!" he saw himself say. He nodded delightedly. The look of ludicrous astonishment on his face as it had been then, and as it now appeared through the glass, was too much. He doubled up in unrestrained laughter.

When he regained control of himself his figure through the glass was gone. Hastily reviewing his movements he remembered he had entered his office and spent a lot of time at his desk.

"Here's where I came in," he chuckled. "Now to get busy on my plan." He went into the lab . . .

* * *

"OOOH," Mary Saunders groaned. She opened her eyes and looked up into the worried face of her husband. In a moment she realized she was in a speeding taxi.

"What happened?" she groaned, touching her forehead tenderly. "Oh!" She sat up quickly, an angry light in her eyes. "I remember now. It's all your fault, George Saunders!" She moved away from him to the other end of the seat.

"My fault!" George exclaimed. "I worry about you all morning on account of a premonition—I warn you not to use the vacuum, and because you do, and get hurt just like in the premonition, it's MY fault!"

"Yes, it is," Mary said firmly. "If you hadn't called up so much I wouldn't have vacuumed until this afternoon. Maybe I'd even have waited and let you do it before the company came tonight. But when I saw you on the porch peeking in at me instead of being at work—and after all those phone calls, it was your fault that I fell over the vacuum hose. Turn this taxi around and take me back home."

"But—" George protested, then gave up. "Oh, all right. Back home, driver."

Mary, still angry, got out of the cab as soon as it stopped. She was waiting with an expression of patient martyrdom, leaning against the front door, when George got through paying the driver and came up the walk.

Automatically his eyes turned to the

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window the glass company had installed that morning—the root, he was now convinced, of all the trouble. He caught his breath. Through the window he saw Mary in the living room, furiously vacuuming, the bruise on her forehead a large angry welt.

He compressed his lips silently. His eyes wavered from Mary leaning against the door to Mary in the living room, vacuuming. Without saying a word he took out his keys and unlocked the door. Pushing it open he marched through the house and down to the basement.

He slipped out the side door from the basement with the hammer under his coat in case Mary saw him. In front again, he stole softly up the steps to the porch, his eyes glaring at the offending window.

Inside, through the glass, he saw his wife facing the kitchen, her lips moving angrily. Suddenly he saw himself come into view from the kitchen, a pleading look on his face.

He waited for no more. Raising the hammer, he brought it against the glass with shattering force. A million spider-web lines spread out from the point of impact . . .

* * *

"WHAT'D he want, boss?" the poker-faced man asked, looking after the man crossing the empty roulette room toward one of the deserted tables.

"Says he's Professor Blackstone," the heavy-set owner of the gambling casino answered. "Think's he's got a system to beat the wheel and wanted to study it before anyone comes in. I told him it'd be four hours yet before we start up for the evening—and to go ahead and figure out his system."

The two laughed silently as the fragile figure of the professor stopped beside one of the tables, placed a pair of thick-lensed spectacles on his nose, took out a pad and pencil, and concentrated his gaze on the luxuriously built wheel.

They watched briefly while the professor started jotting down figures in the notepad, then turned away, amused at this sucker who was eager to beat the wheel with his "system."

Professor Blackstone had approached the roulette table a little doubtfully. It was so utterly deserted, and he was not quite used to the idea of being able to see into the future.

When he put on the spectacles containing lenses cut from the large pane of glass in his office and looked through them, the table was no longer deserted, however. The wheel was spinning beautifully. A marble was dancing around on it. When it slowed down the marble came to rest. He wrote the number it stopped at in the upper left hand corner of the first sheet. Lifting his glasses slightly he looked at his watch. It said five o'clock. Dropping his glasses into place he looked at his watch again and saw that it said three minutes after nine. He wrote the time after the number.

The wheel spun again. Again he wrote the number down, this time just under the first one. After he had done this several times he became more sure of himself. He took to glancing about him, noting the people around the table with interest.

After twenty minutes had gone by he located himself standing at one end of the table, a large stack of chips in front of himself, and people crowding around him trying to get a glimpse into the notebook he glanced at surreptitiously each time before placing his bet.

He was enjoying it now—watching what would take place four hours in the

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future, peering under his glasses to jot the number the ball stopped at on his notepad.

He saw himself finally gather up his chips and start toward the cashier's window. He saw something else. A slim, pokerfaced man skillfully lifted the notebook from his pocket as he pushed through the crowd. This thief joined three other men and the four of them came to the roulette table and started making bets.

"Aha!" he muttered. "I'll fix those men."

He faithfully wrote the numbers as they came up until he had six correct ones. The next time he deliberately wrote an incorrect number. Then three correct ones, a false one, a correct one, and five straight false numbers.

"That should teach them!" he said. He looked around. He couldn't find himself anywhere in sight. "I must have left," he thought. He let his eyes dwell in derision on the backs of the four crooks who were heading toward the exit, then took off his glasses.

At once the gambling room was its deserted, brooding self again. He looked around while he slipped his glasses in his breast pocket. He glanced at his watch and saw it would be a little better than an hour yet before play started.

"I'll have time for something to eat," he decided.

"Got your system figured out?" a voice sounded behind him. He turned his head hastily. It was the manager of the casino who had given him permission to study the roulette game.

"I think so," he answered in a purposively authoritative voice. "Mathematics, you know. But I'll be easy on you. I'll stop when I've won a hundred thousand. I'm not really interested in gambling—just in proving my system."

"I suppose you have enough with you to weather any—ah—misses in your calculations?" the manager asked.

"Two thousand dollars," the professor said. "But I really don't expect to have to use more than a couple of hundred of it."

He smiled inwardly at the amused tolerance on the gambling proprietor's face.

THE evening went just as he had seen it go. There were, of course, many incidentals that he hadn't seen through the spectacles. It was vastly different to see himself standing where he would be in the future and see himself go through motions, and to actually be living that future consciously.

He found several problems coming up that he had missed. As soon as he had won several thousands of dollars he found to his annoyance that other players were placing their bets with his. He stopped this eventually by making a false bet that broke several of them and taught the others to be wary of him and his system.

Eventually he had his hundred thousand in chips in front of him and noted with satisfaction that it was exactly the time he had seen himself quit.

Putting his notebook carelessly in his side pocket with an inward chuckle, he gathered up his chips and pushed through the admiringly respectful crowd toward the cashier's window.

When he got there and unloaded his armful of chips he felt for his notebook and found it gone, but so skillfully had it been done that he hadn't felt it leave his pocket, even though he had tried to detect it.

"Would you like cash or a check, sir?" the cashier asked.

"A check, if you please," he answered. "Also an envelope." He filled out the name and address of his bank on the envelope while he waited for the

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check. When it was handed out through the cashier's window he endorsed it and added, "for deposit only in the First National Bank," and slipped it in the envelope.

With one last look around he made his departure, dropping the envelope in the mailbox at the entrance to the gambling casino. His skillful fingers flipped down the mailbox cover and slipped the envelope containing the check into the box so swiftly that the whole process didn't cause him to miss his stride. The eyes that followed his departure from inside the casino missed the mailing of the envelope.

Humming contentedly, the professor found his car in the parking lot and slid in behind the wheel, thinking pleasantly of the new car he would buy as soon as that check cleared with the bank.

He chuckled as his car wheeled out onto the highway for the five mile drive to his office, thinking of the four crooks and their certain losses if they followed the number sequence he had written in his note pad.

As the landscape slipped smoothly by, his mind turned to experiments he planned on performing with the mysterious glass. There were big questions yet to be answered.

Did the glass, in some mysterious way, jump across time and view the only reachable future point? Or would, say, two thicknesses of the glass bring the future eight hours distant to the present, and three thicknesses twelve hours?

Would melting down the glass and getting thinner sheets make possible viewing a closer future, like—say—fifteen minutes away?

He had been too interested in that first experiment, the making of a hundred thousand dollars, to consider these more important questions before. Now they filled his mind.

HE TURNED the car onto the street leading to his laboratory. It was only as he was pulling to the curb to park that he finally became aware of the car that had followed him all the way from the gambling casino.

He had been subconsciously aware of it all the time, he now knew, but only when it followed him into the deserted street and showed signs of stopping did he finally realize consciously that it was not just another motorist.

"Those four crooks!" he thought, angry at himself for not realizing they would be out for revenge when they realized he had tricked them with phony numbers. "But no—they wouldn't have had time to realize that yet when he left. That hundred thousand!"

Self disgust at his stupidity flooded his mind as he ran quickly from the car to the building entrance. Of course, the crooks wouldn't sit idly by and watch him coolly walk out with a hundred thousand! That was too much money to forget about!

His fingers were starting to sweat as he fumbled in his trousers for the key ring. He unlocked the street door and let himself into the deserted building. With mounting panic he locked the door again on the inside.

By the time he reached the first landing he heard the gentle rattling as the men who had followed him tried that door and found it locked.

His knees were weak as he climbed upward to his lab and office. He was already regretting not having stayed in the car and gone to the nearest police station and asked for help.

"They didn't see me mail that check," he panted. "They think I have the cash on me, and will kill me to get it."

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The silence of the dark, empty staircase filled him with terror. He fumbled at the lock to his door, finally getting it unlocked.

Inside, he locked the door again and flooded the room with light. The familiar surroundings calmed him. He stood there, with his back against the door, trying frantically to figure out something.

"With a hundred thousand dollars at stake they'll get in somehow—and quickly," he thought. "I should call the police, but will they have time to get here?"

He crossed to the door to his office and went inside. In a moment he had the police on the phone, and told them to come quickly. He told them a man had been killed and others were in danger, just to make sure they wouldn't delay.

Then he went back into the lab. Maybe, he thought, there might be something on the shelves that could be mixed into a poison gas or an explosive or something to use as a weapon.

He paused near one of the shelves on the far side of the lab. A movement from the office caught his eye. He turned and looked through the glass. Down in one corner of the glass were two small holes where he had cut out the glass for his spectacles, but he didn't notice that now.

There were men in his office—and he realized that those men would not actually be there for four hours yet.

His feet moved slowly, unconsciously, as he approached the window to see better what was going on inside. There were men with the uniforms of policemen, and grim-faced men in civilian clothes.

They seemed intent on something just out of the range of his vision near the floor. He went up to the window and looked in, then swayed dizzily, his features freezing into an expression of indescribable unbelief and horror—for there, lying on the floor, was his body, riddled by bullets.

For one eternal moment the scene tore into his brain, and with it the realization that what he was seeing was the UNCHANGEABLE future. Then his mind awoke, berserk with fear and the maddening hopelessness of averting of that which WILL ALREADY HAVE HAPPENED SHORTLY.

A two-gallon jar of distilled water rested on one of the tables. Professor Blackstone picked it up and hurled it violently at the innocently gleaming surface of the glass window. It broke and sent water cascading to the floor, but it cracked the window.

Moaning in a low, sobbing voice he found a hammer in a drawer and went to the inoffensive window and completed the job, pounding until the entire window was white in color from the millions of spiderweb cracks that covered it.

He stopped only when he heard the glass of the hall door break.

"No!" he protested wildly. "No!" He backed into his office as the grim, menacing men advanced with slow determination toward him . . .

"THAT'S aggravating!" the tall, dark-complexioned man said, tossing the letter on the desk angrily. "Nothing but criminal carelessness!"

He paced up and down on the expensive oriental rug, his long slim fingers knotted together behind him, his bearded face smouldering in anger.

"Inexcusable!" he said after several turns about the room. "I'll have some other company make them after this."

The letter that had caused his anger lay face up on the desk Its letterhead was that of a nationally known glass

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factory. Under the "Dear Sir": it began:

"We regret to inform you that we have been unable to locate that special batch of glass you sent us. As nearly as we can determine, some workman, not realizing what it was or that it was not ordinary glass, must have used it on some other, and unknown job. We are still looking, and if we find where it went we will salvage it and use it as it was supposed to have been used. Meanwhile, if you have more of your special glass and care to continue doing business with us, we will be happy to be of service to you as always."

Above the "Dear Sir": was the address of the letter. It was addressed simply to "The Crystal Ball Supply Company, Madras, India."

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 55

ing he could use to keep himself afloat. He knew he couldn't keep swimming indefinitely. His strength would soon be exhausted.

He gazed upward in the direction from which he had fallen. His eyes widened. Suspended in the air about twenty feet above him was a square metal box. It looked like—and Dexter knew it was—a money box. It hung from a length of rope which disappeared into nothingness several feet above it. That nothingness, Dexter realized, was the gateway to this particular plane—the gateway too high for him to reach.

Ballou, it seemed, had arranged a clever trap. He had suspended the money box through the gateway by means of the rope. Anyone following the rope, and unaware of the much lower level of the plane beyond, would fall; and would be trapped in this other-world ocean.

Dexter was still paddling water and staring up at the box, when the thing came up out of the dark depths and wrapped its hungry tentacles around him. He had time only for a thin bleat of terror before the ocean closed with a bubbling rush over his head.

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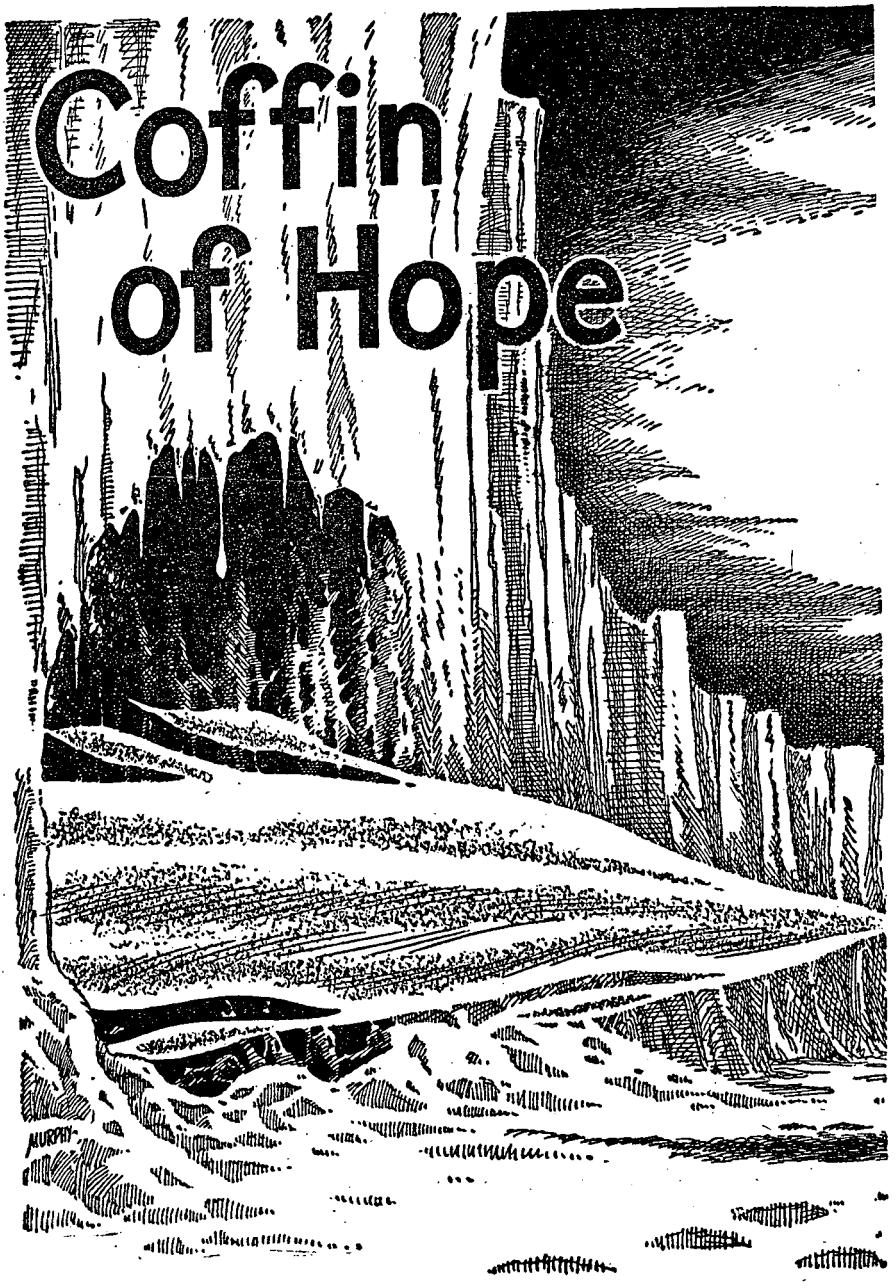
Coffin of Hope



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By LEE FRANCIS

They had slept for over a thousand years, and now they had awakened, looking for the new world of man — a world of weird beasts!

THE CORRIDOR was dark, for the pale, greenish light that came through the ice barrier. The light bathed the ceiling and tinted long rows of pillars that supported it. Beyond the corridor, light had not penetrated for a thousand years.

The first man was young. Perhaps twenty-four. His clean, well shaped face was at rest, a slight smile touching the lips. A shock of blond hair was combed straight back from his high forehead. He was stretched flat on his back on a couch of soft, rubbery stuff. The couch was one of three, lined up in perfect symmetry, along the right wall of the corridor.

Beside each couch stood a large, square metal cabinet. Projecting from the cabinets were lenses, focused upon three men. Watching over them and waiting for the *time*.

All the mechanical details were identical. Wires ran from the metal boxes, and were clamped to the arms, legs and chests of the men. Transpar-

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ent tubes, carrying tiny lines of fluid, led to each right arm. Needles fed the veins. Needles that had been feeding these three for a thousand years.

The man on the second couch was about fifty-five. His face was lined and the texture of the skin was like leather. His hair was silver-white, combed long down his neck. His eyes, open and staring sightlessly toward the vaulted roof, were pale blue.

The third was small and rather thin. His skin was pale and his hands, white and delicate. The hands of a man who had never done physical labor.

Each man, each article in the corridor, was covered by a thin coating of crystal clear ice.

At a precise moment, the silence of the corridor was broken by the sudden humming sound in each of the cabinets. Three lights went on and amber color warmth flooded over each of the men. The ice disappeared.

Beyond that, very little seemed to be happening. The process was slow. It would be many hours before any of them moved. Perhaps—never.

THE THING that amazed Roger Warren was the most complete comfort he felt upon awakening. He opened his eyes and rolled his head slowly from side to side. It was as though he had only dozed. Startled by the realization of what had actually happened, he sat up abruptly. A painful twinge hit his right arm. Grinning sheepishly, he dropped back and touched the needle that entered his arm. He drew it out carefully. He sat up again.

"I'll need more food in an hour," he said in a soft voice. He was, through habit, memorizing these things in his own mind. "Formula One."

"Repeat every word aloud," he said. "Stanton said it would be necessary to keep ourselves alert in case of accident."

He released himself from the clamps and placed the wires carefully over the machine as he stood up. The motor stopped humming. He stared at the machine.

"Thank you," he said gravely, as though speaking to a very good friend.

He flexed his arm and leg muscles slowly. He stood slightly over six feet tall, and he was well bronzed and smoothly muscled. He brushed the unruly hair back from his eyes and smiled. The smile faded as he wondered if it had really happened as it should. Had he actually slept the required length of time?

He leaned hurriedly over the cabinet and studied the gauge carefully. He sighed and the smile came back.

"Calendar chart regulated by the food-flow gauge," he said. "One-thousand years and, approximately, ten hours. Everything is all right."

His voice rose in exultation.

"*A thousand years.*"

He spoke those last words as though they answered a prayer. He went around the end of the couch and looked down with some concern at Phillip Stanton.

"Hello, Roger," Stanton said. His eyes were alive now, and there was a twinkle in them. He had caught Warren off guard. Warren hadn't expected Stanton to awaken so quickly. With an odd lump in his throat, he said;

"Hello Phillip."

So *this* was how men greeted each other after being separated by a wall of sleep for a thousand years?

He helped Stanton free himself from the wires and the feeding needle. Stanton arose. He was slightly unsteady on his feet, as they

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gripped each other's hands. Stanton said;

"It isn't—a false alarm, is it?"

Roger Warren shook his head. A grin widened his ample mouth. He remembered how he had awakened with the same fear.

"You are looking at a man who has been frozen into sleep for a thousand years," he said. "Phillip, we've done it. The experiment was a success."

Stanton sighed.

"I'm glad," he said simply.

Another voice, slightly harsher than Stanton's, but filled with the same enthusiasm, interrupted them.

"I guess you two came around a little faster than I. I've been listening to enough of your conversation so that I guess we're successful."

Warren hurried to the third couch and helped James Cragg free himself from the wires. Cragg looked tired. He had worked hard during the study that had led up to this wild scheme. the same pallor showed on his face, now that he was once again awake.

"Good Lord, Roger," he said, even before he was on his feet, "do you and Phillip realize just what a wonderful thing we have done? It's—it's almost beyond the grasp of the human mind!"

Warren said;

"It's over with and we have work ahead."

"I still can't believe it," Cragg said. "We've got exactly what we wanted. We've succeeded in preserving the life span for a thousand years. We are as fresh as a bunch of school boys."

STANTON, by his very age, came to Cragg's side and put a hand on the professor's shoulder.

"Don't attempt to grasp the full meaning all at once, Jim," he said. "As leader of the group, I suggest we follow the instructions I outlined before we slept. It will busy our minds, and there are certain tasks that must be attended to at once. We can't afford any delay, now that we are to live as normal humans again."

"I'll open the laboratory and prepare the formula," Roger Warren said. He was eager to be out about their work. Already the hot blood of youth was again coursing through his body.

Stanton nodded approvingly.

"And Jim and I will start the generators," he added. "We'll need warmth and food first. They are of primary importance."

Warren moved swiftly across the corridor toward the laboratory door. His eyes caught the details of this cavern home that was so old, and yet as familiar as yesterday to his eyes.

He had been taught back in that dim world of the past, that action was necessary. Direct action that would bring this frozen room back to life. It was all as they had left it. Vast chambers carved from the stone. A half dozen huge doors leading to the chemistry laboratory, (his private domain), the food lockers, the generator room, the study.

Rooms for everything a teacher, a scientist, and a chemistry professor would need to re-educate a world.

The ice, had done a good job. It had preserved everything as they had hoped it would. The temperature remained the same here, year after year.

His fingers contacted the intense cold of the laboratory door. He turned the handle and opened it. It stuck, and he had to kick away the ice and the white frost that had gathered around the sill.

Farther down the corridor, he heard Stanton and Cragg having the same trouble with the door to the

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generator chamber. Then the chemistry laboratory was before him, white, clean, with tables and long rows of shelves filled with test tubes, bottles of precious fluids, and the burners he had to have before they could use the frozen liquids.

The cold chilled him, through the warm, leather jacket and the ankle length breeches. Though the light that came through the ice sealed entrance to the cavern, lighted the laboratory a bit, he stood still listening for the hum of the first generator.

It came, and with it, the first rhythmic turning of the heater fans and the sudden brilliance of the lamps. He held his arm over his eyes until they accustomed themselves to the bright glow. There was another warmth, deep inside him, for the men who labored over the machinery in the generator chamber.

"Good," he said.

The room was long and low. It heated quickly. The small fluid heater on the first bench, was red hot already. He found the brown sealed bottle labeled, "Formula One."

He carried it across the room, handling it with all the care that had been schooled into him through long training. He slid the bottle into the container of the fluid heater and closed the cover. Standing there, listening as the other two generators snapped to life, he thought about the things they had planned. It was only a dream then. Now it was reality.

It seemed like last night that Phillip Stanton had talked to them before they stretched out, full length, on the couches. He almost worshipped Stanton. Stanton was the one scientist on earth who was not frightened at the thought of facing reality. He and Cragg could thank the older man for this.

THE DOOR to the laboratory opened and his companions came in. Stanton, proud-shouldered and straight as a ramrod, came toward Warren, a smile of increasing confidence on his face.

Roger Warren rubbed his hands to- first hurdle. The generators are in perfect running order."

Roger Warren rubbed his hands together.

"Sort of an old home week," he confessed. "Our dinner, though it isn't exactly a steak or french fried potatoes, will be ready in a moment."

Behind Stanton, James Cragg chuckled. Cragg, though he was still frightened of the job ahead, felt that whatever might happen, the three of them were perfecty fitted for each other. He knew that there would be times when he must lean on these two, and take from them, the courage of facing reality. Cragg was a teacher and a dreamer. The thought of such a world as they might face, frightened him.

"Let's have a taste of this Formula One you rate so highly, Rog," he said. "I'm hungry enough to start in on a live cow."

Warren opened the fluid heater and lifted the bottle out. With a pair of asbestos gloves, to protect his hands from the heat, he poured three cups of the formula. Each man took one.

Stanton grimaced and drained his as soon as it had cooled enough. Cragg took a sip, made a wry face, and tried again.

"You'll have to do better than that, Jim," Warren told him, and following Stanton's example, finished the drink.

"I suppose so," Cragg admitted. "I wish that our stomachs were up to digesting a steak."

He finally managed the remainder of the cup.

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Roger Warren sat down on one of the tables and crossed his legs.

"I'm not going to tell you how I feel about all this," he said. "I suppose my feelings are shared by both of you."

"As far as the teacher in me is concerned," Cragg admitted. "I'm afraid I'm a little timid and frightened about the whole thing. I never was much for this adventure stuff."

Phillip Stanton looked thoughtful.

"There have been many yesterdays in our life that we know nothing about," he said. "We're concerned with today and all the tomorrows. I only hope that the world is in a far better condition than we expected. I hope the events we feared have never taken place."

Cragg nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps we've wasted our time. I fervently hope so."

Roger Warren chuckled.

"We've wasted nothing," he said. "We would have lived out our years in a savage, war torn world. Now we live in a new age. If it is better, then we'll make the best of what we are offered. Be it good or bad, we have a definite place in it. As for me, I'm ready to go and find out what has happened to our planet. I used to be quite fond of the place, at least before our people went mad with the lust for blood."

THE THREE men were garbed in heavy winter clothing. The scene at the entrance could have been the camp of any 1950 expedition into the frozen north. A huge snowtractor stood like a polished monster, waiting to plunge out into the swirling land of snow that was beyond the barrier. The motors were warming up, their great power chambers purring under the fuel that Roger Warren had fed through the lines.

Crouched on his knees before the barrier, Warren opened the valves of the fire-gun and aimed the roaring flame at the ice that sealed them into the cavern. It sputtered and licked greedily at the wall of ice. Water shot back in a mist and a pool of it formed on the frozen stone floor. Warren moved back slowly, and the fire gouged a hole through to the sunlight.

A huge sheet of ice fell forward and crashed outside. Warren stood up and turned off the flame. He discarded the dark-glassed helmet and asbestos gloves. He coiled the feeder wire around the gun and attached the gun to the rack on the side of the tractor.

"At least everything above the arctic circle looks the same," he shouted to the two men who were already in the cab of the tractor.

Beyond the opening of the cavern, the sun shone down upon endless, glittering snow, and rugged, jutting ice peaks. The dry, penetrating chill penetrated the corridor, robbing it of the heat they had been able to get from the generators.

Warren climbed stiffly into the cab of the tractor. Cragg was seated in the co-driver's chair, his safety straps in place, gloved hand on the feeder-control button. Behind him, Phillip Stanton stood with his hands gripping the back of Cragg's chair.

"I'm like a child, Roger," Stanton confessed. "Now that we're ready, I feel as though the delay will be unbearable. Can we leave at once?"

Warren knew how the scientist felt. Regardless of what happened once they reached the United States, they were going *home*. A home that none of them had seen for a thousand years. He sat down in the empty driver's seat and strapped the heavy belts across his legs. Behind him,

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Stanton was duplicating the process, making himself safe in the third seat.

Warren touched the power pedal and the motors roared, full of all the strength they would need for the journey south.

"Everything in order, Jim?" Warren asked.

James Cragg's eyes moved over the instrument gauges. His mouth felt dry. He licked his lips and said;

"As ready as we'll ever be, Roger. I've a feeling that when those lugs start digging into the ice, we'll be away on a journey that we might regret. It's a frightening experience, this returning to a land you've been away from so long."

Warren chuckled. It was a deep, wholehearted chuckle.

"Faint heart never won, Jim," he said. "It's a little frightening perhaps, but it's also the greatest adventure that any man ever faced."

He yanked the feeder-lever back as far as it would go, and the heavy, armor-plated lugs sank into the ice. The tractor creaked and reared up in protest and then the lugs took hold. The huge machine shot out through the cavern entrance and sank deeply into the soft snow.

Warren pushed down the small button marked "Gripper", and huge spikes shot out of each lug and found footing in the ice. The tractor gained speed and hurtled away from the cavern.

None of them spoke for ten minutes. Then Phillip Stanton said;

"Look back. It's the last glimpse you'll have of your home for a long time. You may want to remember it."

Warren turned, caught a glimpse of Cragg's frightened but determined face, and then saw the tiny, black speck behind them that was all he could see of the cavern.

After that one last look toward the cavern, he had no time to think of it again. Driving the tractor forward, avoiding the jutting ice peaks and floundering swiftly through the valleys of deep snow, was enough to keep any man, regardless of his youth, forever vigilant against aching muscles and tired, half-blinded eyes.

PHILLIP Stanton had been studying the horizon for the past hour, his eyes searching for the city he knew they must find. At last he saw the dark outline of the city against the rising sun. He pointed ahead eagerly.

"The first major stronghold of civilization that we've reached," he said.

Edmonton, Canada, thus far only a far-off outline of a city against the still dark sky. Stanton continued to watch, feeling uneasy.

Two hours later, their worst fears were realized. Edmonton, the first city on their line of march south, was in a shambles.

The three men in the cab of the tractor were tired and dispirited. There was here, a horrible lack of life and spirit. A feeling of being completely lost. It pervaded throughout the wrecked, wilderness-choked city, and it entered the cab and made them all feel small and unimportant in facing this terrible condition.

Naked walls, what few remained, stood with weird fingers of stone and brick pointing to the sky. Rubble, everywhere, was buried in earth mounds and covered by stunted trees and bushes. Roads were only outlines where grass had long since poked stubborn fingers upward to hide man's work.

Roger Warren made radio active tests of the territory. All tests were negative.

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"We will have to search the place," Stanton said. "It will be safe enough. No man-made hell could last this long."

THREE hours later, they met at the snow tractor. None of them had found any sign of life. James Cragg summed up the situation.

"I've walked over every rubble pile in the city, he said disgustedly. "Nothing but junk. Not even a den where an animal might live."

"No human tracks outside the city," Warren added. "A few animal tracks in the forest."

There was very little more to be said. That night a new fear came over the group. The fear that atomic war had done a complete job of wiping the human race from the earth.

The following morning, they moved south once more. They didn't talk much.

* * *

It was always the same. They planned to visit every city in the North and South American Continent.

This would be necessary if they were to have the complete answer to their quest. Food was no problem. Already, Stanton had found old fruits and nuts, familiar to them all, growing in the first warm valleys they entered. Enough formula food was packed in the tractor to feed them indefinitely. Fuel pellets for the tank would keep the motors running for an estimated five years. As soon as they left the snowcountry behind, Roger Warren released the wheel arrangement under the tractor and the heavy lugs shot upward out of sight under the body. The wheels made their speed greater and the travel was more comfortable.

One night, a month after they left their base, the three gathered around the small table in the supply room of the tractor.

"Phillip," Roger Warren said suddenly, "we know that the atomic blasts didn't kill everything. I've seen wild life some distance away. The forests and the flowers have grown even thicker than we ever saw them. The *seed* wasn't killed. Then why should the seed of the human race also be missing?"

There had been several discussions like this. Each time they felt a little less lonely. Each time, they found hope for a few more days of intensive search.

"Tomorrow we'll reach San Francisco," Stanton said hopefully. "Seattle was a graveyard on a hill. We can only hope that San Francisco is more than that. Why we haven't found at least a few humans, I don't know. Perhaps they've been driven south. Perhaps they lost the art of fighting the elements of the north."

"We can't stop looking," Cragg said. "We've got to search out every possibility."

"On the other hand," Warren said, "why not face the facts. If men and women were left on earth, why haven't they come back to their cities? The last of the atomic wars must have ended over eight hundred years ago. Some of them would have drifted back."

* * *

A man's mind can endure only so much strain. Like a tightly wound watch, it will break. San Francisco, a rubble heap on a hill. The Golden Gate, a gaping, water filled bay, a single strand of steal that twisted and lashed in the air where a bridge had once hung.

Then, south again. Always south. Driving themselves against the urge to give up.

Here and there, Warren saw bits

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of concrete. A spot or two where the grass had not grown. Places where the valleys were burned and nothing lived again. Mostly, nature had been able to creep back and reclaim what was hers.

Then—Warren saw a man.

"By God, it is," James Cragg shouted wildly. "I can see him. See, there close to the trees. Maybe a half mile. He's just a small shadow against the trees."

Warren clashed the gears as he whirled the tractor around and rushed in the direction Cragg was pointing. At once, they were all talking wildly.

"I saw him a little way back," Cragg shouted excitedly. "I got it all figured out now. Remember, we didn't find them in the north. All men and women have moved south to the warm country. They haven't anything left to work with. They're hidden down here in the warm country whre life is simple for them."

"Waiting for us," Stanton said quietly, "although of course, they don't except help from anyone."

Roger Warren could see the man clearly now. See him as he turned and dashed into the forest.

"He's frightened of us," he said. "We'll have a hard time finding him in that tangle."

"But we *have* to catch him," Stanton groaned.

THE TRACTOR halted, its ugly snout against the undergrowth.

"This is as far as we can go," Warren said, and snapped off the switch.

"Out and after him!" Stanton cried. "Try not to frighten him too badly. This may be our one opportunity."

They hurriedly deserted the tractor. Warren was the last one out. Before he reached the ground, Stanton was already out of sight, shouting at the man they pursued.

Warren could hear Stanton and Cragg, panting, shouting as they fought their way through the forest.

He followed, awed by the terrific height of the trees, the wealth of rotted, fallen logs over which he had to struggle. Here the forest took over and the cities were forgotten.

He heard Cragg cry out.

"There he is. Head him off, Phillip. There to your left!"

Then Stanton's voice.

"I've got him. My God, Cragg, he's a fighter. I don't want to hurt him."

Warren ran as fast as he could. He broke into a little clearing to see Stanton sitting astride his man. Then his heart sank as he saw the ugly, pitted face, covered with black hair. Saw the queer stumps that once had been arms. Stumps that were covered with smooth flesh at the shoulders, where limbs had never grown.

No wonder Stanton had captured him so easily. This was only part of a man...

* * *

It was late. The night was warm and a fire was burning lazily near the tractor. Birds sang in the forest, as though the sun had not gone down. It was a gentle, quiet world. A world of dreams. They had found their first human, and in their success, had found failure.

The man without arms sat alone. His eyes were bright and intelligent. He seemed to have no wish to escape now. His loins were covered by the skin of a small animal. Warren stared at him but the armless man did not seem to resent that.

"No memory of things past," Warren said.

Stanton shook his head. He had retained his keen interest in the search for many months. Now, he didn't seem to care. The exhaustion had pen-

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etrated his body—his soul.

"I had never considered this possibility," he said at last. "We know the theory of mutants. I recall that some scientists said the atomic force might change our whole physical setup. That there was a possibility our bodies might be changed. I never thought to see it. Here we have man, who has forgotten he ever had arms. The atomic power did that. In addition to physical change, it probably changed the entire plan of the mind and brain. Rog, it isn't much to look forward to, this educating of humans who are no longer really humans at all."

"Wait a minute," Cragg protested. "You mean they might *all* be armless? That this isn't an accident?"

Roger Warren shook his head.

"Worse than that, Jim," he said. "The blast of atomic power would probably produce a hybrid. Men without legs. Men with more than the ordinary pair of legs. The reaction was so powerful that it evidently touched everyone. Some may be normal. We'll find those with all sorts of ugly changes. The whole atomic order of things has been disturbed. They would go on breeding, without realizing that such breeding should be controlled. Result—God knows how many of—of *these* we'll find."

He pressed his fingers against tired, throbbing eyes.

"No use worrying yet. He is the first. Perhaps he'll lead us to the others. Perhaps we'd be happier if he didn't."

The armless creature did not talk. He seemed to understand them, however, as he leaned forward, smiling at every word. He *could* not speak. There was a mouth, but no tongue in that mouth. The art of talking had long since been denied him.

"He's friendly enough," Stanton admitted. "I think he wants to help us."

IN THE FOREST, Roger Warren took the lead. They had been walking steadily for three hours. The armless one went ahead of them all, pausing occasionally to wait for them to catch up. The forest grew thinner. Great rock ledges rose upward, toward the hills.

Warren watched the eager smile on the man's face.

"You're wrong in one theory, Stanton," he called back. "You said he looked as though he wanted to help us. It's the other way around. I'm sure that he knows we've come to help him. I think he realized from the first that we were here for a definite purpose."

They stood in the clearing and stared upward at the bare foothills. For the first time, they were looking at the cave city of the Western Slope.

After studying the hundreds of cave entrances on the face of the hills, James Cragg spoke:

"Here is your new civilization," he said. "This explains Seattle, San Francisco, the others."

There was no other explanation. In rough, broken, lines, hundreds of caves covered the entire face of the foothills for as far as the eye could see. The mountains were pitted with them, as though a vast flock of swallows had made their homes there. Stanton, panting from the rigorous workout he had received, looked at their guide.

"He wants us to go on," he said.

The man was running ahead, then back again, repeating the process like a dog who wishes his masters to follow. They knew what they were to see. At least, knew part of it. Would it be even worse than they expected?

On the smooth ground before the caves, a large circle had been made

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many years ago. Stones were lined around the edge of the circle, and a huge, flat boulder occupied the exact center. The three men stood atop that boulder and watched the remnants of a civilization drift into the circle.

They were above the throng that was gathering. Men, women and children came slowly down from the caves and moved closer. They were like lost souls, passing in review.

Warren hated those long minutes. He felt like a hateful God, staring down at those who were less fortunate than he. He saw the eager, hopeful faces.

Men without arms. Children walking on four legs. Women without legs at all, dragging their bodies along with skinny, stretched arms. There were thousands of them. How many, he didn't even dare guess. They kept on coming, until the vast circle was a sea of white, bobbing faces.

Then the armless guide was at their side again, springing gracefully to the top of the stone. He pointed at Warren and motioned downward toward the crowd. Warren looked and caught his breath.

A girl drew close to the rock and jumped to his side. She was young. Her head was bowed and she did not look up at him. The armless guide made queer noises in his throat and placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked up then, straight into Warren's eyes.

"If you are Gods," she said in a gentle voice, "be kind to us. We have suffered for many years. You would have been kinder to stay away."

"She can talk," Cragg said in a strained voice. "She's—like us."

"Shut up," Warren said quickly. Not then, not ever afterwards, did he know why he spoke like that to Jim Cragg. It was as though Cragg had broken some wonderful spell that only he and the girl should share. Cragg had every right to speak. He didn't realize it then, though. He just kept looking at the girl.

SHE WAS slim, and graceful, built like a dream. She wore only the animal skin at her waist, and the remainder of her body was only slightly tanned and as smooth as satin.

"You are not crippled like the others," he said.

Her face turned very pink. He knew that she was frightened.

"I am marked, also," she said quietly. "Worse than the others."

Phillip Stanton had been standing behind Warren. He moved forward and addressed the girl.

"We aren't Gods, child. We are three men who escaped the wars. We've come back to help all of you. We have brought the means to help. Will you tell them that."

His arm indicated the gathering.

The girl did not take her eyes from Warren's face. She continued to speak directly to him. He would have sworn that she didn't even hear Stanton.

"Don't *you* understand? Ever since I awakened in this place, I've been waiting for only one person. I've been waiting for you."

Roger Warren had never been touched so deeply. There was a great mystery here. A mystery that he had to solve. It troubled him. The girl was telling him that she would do anything he wished her to do. Why?

"You must not say things like that," he said. "Listen to me carefully. Answer my questions, and then try to help us. We are going to help all of your people."

She shuddered, but she nodded her head and watched his lips closely.

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There seemed to be no one present but him.

"Whatever you tell me, I will do."

She stepped close to him. She was magnificent in her loyalty to this man. Whatever he said, she would do. Where ever he went, she would never be away from him—not now that he had come.

Warren looked from Cragg to Stanton. They nodded at him. Cragg said;

"Okay, if you're the only one she'll talk to, give her our story. Ask her about the remainder of civilization. We've got to find out what the problem is. Then we'll face it."

Warren looked at the girl once more. She was like a magnet, trying to draw everything from his mind and his heart.

"Are there many left?" he asked.

She understood everything he asked. Understood even beyond the words he used. She knew that he referred not only to those present but to the others.

"There are twenty cave cities," she said. "Three on this continent and the remainder across the seas. There are fifty Originals, like myself. The remainder of them were crippled by the Power. We Originals are isolated and kept away from each other. We cannot propogate. Eventually we will die.

"We Originals were touched not on our body, but in our souls. We are not attracted to anyone, save the one person on earth who is our mate. I have never met my mate, until today."

"You must not say things like that," he told her. "Where are the cities?"

She said;

"This is the western cave city. There is one in the middle west, where once the city of Denver existed. The other is carved from the ruins under the city of New York. I speak these names for they have been taught to us. I don't know their true meanings, if a meaning really exists."

WARREN looked beyond her, toward the pitiful gathering of men and women.

"There are only fifty—" he was going to say *perfect people*, but he hesitated and said, "like you?"

She nodded.

"Where are they?"

"At the middle west cave city," she said. "We are isolated there and kept apart. We must have no social life together. I was brought here because I understand the old language and speak it better than most. My people do not hate me. You see, some of our ancesters escaped the Power by hiding in the north. I am the offspring of one of these Originals. In time, I will die. I have no right to carry on the Original race."

She shuddered.

"Why do they wish to kill you?"

"Because the largest group is not like me, and they can't stand the thought of an Original race growing up among them. I will not be harmed. I will live my life, but will not be allowed to give birth to others like me."

Roger Warren understood the intense loneliness in her. Understood why she had been attracted to him.

"Tell them what we have told you," he said. "Tell them that we ask nothing of them. That we are prepared to help them."

"First I must know from where you have come," she said. "They asked me that."

Warren talked swiftly, trying to forget her as a woman. Reporting everything that had happened.

For an instant, there was hope in her eyes. Then her shoulders drooped.

"I'm afraid that we are no longer capable of learning great things," she said. "We are so split among our-

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selves. Many little groups each pitying itself more than the other. Each *fighting over petty things.*"

Her voice sank to a whisper.

"There is hardly a memory left of the past."

Gently he placed both his hands on her shoulders.

"This will sound like a wild dream to you," he admitted. "But remember that we existed here long before the others. Our heritage goes back to the days before the power came to destroy you all. We *know* that as long as the human mind is capable of learning, we can teach what we know. It's only a matter of time and patience.

He felt her shudder under the contact of his hands. He felt the warmth of her body, like the warmth of summer sending out strength to him.

"I will try to make them understand," she said softly.

IN THE DAYS that followed, new hope was born in the people of the caves. Warren named the girl Blossom, and she went with them to the tractor.

Through the girl, Warren told the people that Stanton, Cragg and himself had come to help them. He explained that they could learn how to rebuild their cities, and gain knowledge of new foods, clothing, and building materials.

The people refused to believe that these three had come down to them from past centuries, but they smiled and accepted help. To the people, these three were of the Originals who had closely guarded the secrets of the past and were now ready to divulge their knowledge for a price. What the price would be, they did not yet know. They would find out.

It was Blossom who told Warren what would happen. They sat together in the forest, for the girl was never far from his side now. She talked for hours about the things that she knew.

"My father died a short time ago," she said. "I don't know when my mother died. We were separated. I will soon be sent back to the others. They don't like to be reminded of us."

Warren said;

"You would have loved the old world. It was wonderful, if people had only had the intelligence to think more of their heritage."

She had learned to believe that Warren and the others really came out of the past. She had heard the whole story from his lips, and there was no choice but to believe anything he told her.

"Don't be angry with my people for not understanding," she begged. "They *are* my people. The Power changed them. They are still human. It is not their fault that they are..."

She halted and her face was pale. She didn't speak for a moment.

She took both his hands in hers.

"I have been forbidden to speak to you about myself," she said in a tender voice. "I want you to understand me. Roger, this—this attraction for you. It isn't because I'm lonely."

He knew that. He knew why, for she loved him no more than he loved her.

"We, who still live in the Original form," Blossom was saying, "had to be attracted to one person. Once there were several hundred of us. Then we were forbidden to mate, because our bodies were good to look at, and theirs were horrible."

She bent forward and kissed him on the cheek.

Her eyes were wide when he took her into his arms. Her fingers touched his neck and locked around his shoulders. The warmth that had been hers, spread through him.

"Blossom," Warren said softly.

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She moved away from him gently.

"Listen to me, Roger," she said. "You are my mate. If you go, I will die. If you die, I will die also. That is why I must tell you of the danger."

He was suddenly cold, knowing that she would not speak like this unless she was badly frightened.

"What danger?"

"My people think you have come here for personal gain," she said. "They think you are Originals, like myself. They will gather all the knowledge that you can give them, and then you'll be isolated like us, and will die without giving birth to our kind. They will give you the worst possible death—a death of loneliness and isolation."

THE PEOPLE of all the caves across the continent gathered at the headquarters on the western slope. They came in long, wandering caravans, on foot, bringing the few things they possessed. Armless people, so terribly deformed that never again would they look human. But there was one comfort in their coming. They still thought. They still reacted as human beings reacted. They were willing to profit by learning.

But with the coming of the throngs, Blossom disappeared...

* * *

At first, Warren was determined to drop his work and search for her. Then that night, an old man came to him. The man had bright, sparkling eyes, for all his grey hair and stiff legs. He came into the circle of fire light, because Warren was alone there. The others were at work inside the tractor. The old man was not frightened of him.

"I bring word from the girl" he told Warren. "You are not to follow her. She is safe. She sends her promise to call you when you are needed."

Warren leaned forward and spoke harshly.

"How can I believe you?"

The old man seated himself near the fire. He was a queer little gnome. with three legs and rounded, stumpless shoulders.

"She is safe with her own kind at the middle west caves," he said. "I dare not stay here long. The others hate to see the Originals among us. I hate no one. I will die soon, and will not have to think of my own horrible shape when I look upon them. That is why I came. She said to tell you the message is from the Blossom. You will understand that, she said."

Warren arose. He knew that the old man told the truth. Her name was not known to anyone else.

"Thank you," he said simply. "If there is anything I can do?"

The old man shook his head.

"You will be wise to leave here, before it is too late," he said. "You cannot teach us anything that will help us. I said that I am too old to hate. I hate no one. That isn't true of all of us."

Before Warren could question him, the old man was gone into the shadows.

For a long time, the blond man stood before the fire, staring into the flames, then he shrugged and turned away, knowing he could do nothing for the present. He owed Cragg and Stanton a debt. He couldn't leave them. Now that the battle was so near and their need for him so great. Stanton was going north tomorrow, to bring back necessary materials. Cragg and he were starting the first town. It would be a city of one story houses constructed of rough boards, and containing bunks. The cave people were

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already at work in the forests with their first crude tools, designed by Stanton himself.

* * *

Three months after the morning Stanton came back from the cavern, the first city was completed. It had been planned to hug the bank of a wide river. Below the village, trenches drained into the river, taking away the refuse. Here a fence had been built to keep the people from using the water. On the upper end of the town, more trenches had been dug. Fresh water came from the stream into the town itself, giving them drinking water and places to wash their new clothing.

Logs came from the wooded slopes and were cut into timbers. Houses went up, with neat roofs and well planned bunks and chairs. The cave people worked hard, coming out into the sun to enjoy a life they had long since forgotten.

As Roger Warren made long trips into the forests, he ran across the six-legged deer, the legless fox, and many other strange animals left by the curse of the Power.

The atomic wars were forgotten as such. Now, the terrific force was referred to as the Power. That one word meant more horror than any other meaning that could be placed upon what had happened.

Gradually the three men learned to accept what they saw, and work with the poor people who came to them. Roger Warren ceased to worry each day about Blossom. Instead, he had in his mind, a lasting image of her sweet face, and in all his work, he thought of her as a person who would need him some day, and who would call him when the time came.

AND FINALLY Warren received another message from the Blossom. An old, old woman came to the rough laboratory he had constructed and said that the Blossom was safe and thinking of him each hour. That was all.

* * *

Three more towns were built in the next half year. They arose on the banks of three California streams. They were separated by fifty miles of desert land. The land was warm, and the fruits that Stanton brought under cultivation flourished again and furnished a varied diet for the people. James Cragg picked three sites for his schools, one in each town. He put the finest books in each school and spent his time evenly between teaching the three. Thus, knowledge again started to grow and fill the people with curiosity toward the past and the future.

That year passed quickly. At the end of each three month period, one of the three men went on the lonely trip north. It was impossible for anyone to follow them, for the tractor moved more swiftly than man could run, and the winds covered their snow tracks before they had gone a mile.

The cavern remained their secret. Each time the tractor came back, it brought greater secrets of education and science. New conceptions of life came to the people who had been almost destroyed by the Power. The first crude blast furnaces were built and tools were made. Bricks were made and the houses took on new form and durability. Cragg told them of the past, and put into their minds the history of the skyscrapers and the farms.

The three cities of the western divide were growing swiftly.

For a reason that Warren could not

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fathom at first, people of the three cities were gradually dividing themselves into certain types. Those who were deformed so far as legs were concerned, gravitated toward the south and gradually that settlement became the home of the Many Legs.

By the same token, those whose arms were deformed, or those who had no arms at all, stayed in the first settlement. The center city seemed to attract those who had other body deformities.

* * *

Then catastrophe struck. Warren came home from one of the gradually decreasing trips north. He met Phillip Stanton at the large laboratory they had constructed in the first settlement. Stanton was waiting for him when he parked the tractor under the shed and went in. The man looked years older. His hair had turned snow white. His hands were trembling.

"I'm glad you're back, Rog," he said quietly. "We've found some very grave trouble I'm afraid."

There had been no warning of this when Warren left. Everything was peaceful. The people showed every sign of being content. Warren discarded his clothing and stood for a time under the shower they had prepared. Then, while he dressed, Stanton found himself able to tell what had happened. It wasn't a pretty story.

"Six days ago," he said, "Cragg came home from the south settlement. He did some teaching down there and was coming in for some advance books. Just a few miles from here, he ran across the bloody bodies of a half dozen people of this settlement. They had been cut open and crucified in the worst possible manner."

Roger Warren said little until he had dressed. He knew what this meant, but he hated to admit it, even to Stanton or himself.

"Phillip," he said, "I wonder if human nature will ever change? Deep down inside, the same hates exist. Each group has learned to hate the other. First they all turned on the Originals, but the Originals were too small a minority to cause them any trouble. Now the Many-Legs hate the Many-Arm people. It's one stacked against the other, with all the freaks of the central village ready to take hell from both."

Stanton nodded.

"I don't know what we can do," he admitted. "Just keep on trying, I guess. We knew there was hatred for the Originals. The Originals are isolated and forbidden to mate. If they are doomed, then by the same token, you and Cragg and I will die sooner or later, at the hands of the very people we're striving to save."

Roger Warren was glad that Stanton saw it that way. It would help, if Stanton didn't cling too much to his ideals.

"We might try some form of punishment," he said. "Can Cragg tell who committed the murders?"

Stanton saw a group of Many-Legs traveling south before he found those corpses. He doesn't have any idea how to identify them."

Warren nodded.

"Maybe it's just as well. In the old days I never found an example where it helped to take blood for blood. Usually, it makes the condition many times worse."

James Cragg had no intention of giving up. In his heart, there was love for his fellow men. Conditions, however, grew steadily worse. Somehow the Many-Arms of the first settlement found out who had murdered their brothers. They sought revenge, and there was a bloody duel in the southern settlement. Many people died, but it did no good. The wars were already

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growing to fearsome proportions.

WARREN LAUNCHED all of his energy into Cragg's teaching. He tried to explain to restless people that war was folly and that the very thing that had once broken them, was on the rampage again. He got only sly smiles of distrust.

It was Stanton who finally admitted that their days were numbered unless something happened to restore harmony. Then Roger Warren received his third and last message from the Blossom.

The old woman came into the laboratory and sat down on the floor in a corner. Her face was without nose or eyes. Skin stretched across the holes where the nose and eyes had once been. Her skin was pocked with ugly marks. Her arms were gone. Her shoulders had a queer, fateful twist in them.

"I should not have come here," she said in a low voice. "I have been told not to carry messages to you. The Blossom needs you at once. You are to go. She is in danger."

Warren asked no questions. He let the old woman go quietly out into the night. He explained the purpose of his trip to both Cragg and Stanton, and because these two knew how important the girl was to him, they gave their permission for him to leave at once.

That night, the tractor roared out of the settlement and rushed headlong into the hills. Curious, shining eyes watched it go.

* * *

Ten hours later, the old woman was found in the street outside the laboratory, her throat slashed from ear to ear. Stanton buried the body himself. After the job was done, he retired to the laboratory and prayed. He had the fearful idea that his prayers would not be answered.

* * *

Roger Warren climbed out of the tractor and stretched his legs. The fuel tank was empty. He found the supply carton and put a new pellet into the tank. He stood on the crest of a low hill, looking down through the dusk into the valley where the Originals were living.

It had been a long journey. He had followed the crude maps Stanton had prepared, and he blesed Stanton for remembering well the roads to Denver.

There were only a few guards here, for the Originals had no wish to escape. He left the tractor hidden in a forest. He walked through the dry, pine scented woods. He saw the tiny fires lighted near the entrance of the caves a short distance away.

For the first time Warren saw an Original man. The man was about thirty, well proportioned and intelligent looking. He wore only the usual tanned skin about his waist, and was unafraid as Warren went toward him. They faced each other in the twilight, and Warren knew that news of him had come ahead.

"I am Warren," he said, and smiled. "I come from the three cities."

The man smiled, showing even rows of teeth. There was neither warmth nor irony in the smile.

"We've been curious about you. We've been forbidden to leave here but we're glad you got the others to leave us. It's very peaceful now."

That was all. The man turned and moved back toward the caves. Warren followed him.

"I came to see the Blossom," Warren said.

The man did not answer or look around. He shrugged.

"You'll tell them that I must see the Blossom at once?"

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The man whirled on him. His voice was devoid of all friendship, yet there was no hatred in it. It was as though Warren was of no importance. Suddenly it was clear. This man was an Original. The Originals were doomed. They had no hope or destiny. They were interested in nothing. The world moved about them in a meaningless pattern. All save for one. Blossom had a purpose. She was waiting for him. Wasn't that a good enough reason for them to hate her?

She came out of the group that waited by the caves. She walked to his side hesitantly and put her hand in his.

"I knew you would come," she said.

Warren looked at the men and women in front of him. They were like a small, unyielding wall. A wall of doomed flesh. They had no courage. A half dozen Many-Arms were standing about. They had no weapons. They were the guards.

Suddenly Warren was disgusted. Here were fifty normal appearing men and women, and in his own group there were only three. Three men had dared try to change a whole civilization of people, and these fifty didn't have the courage to even mingle or find happiness among themselves.

With the Blossom's hand in his, he pushed toward them.

"Take me to your cave," he said grimly.

They parted and let him through. None of them made a sound.

SHE STOOD in the faint light of the burning coals, as lovely as she had been that first day. She was not like them. She had real courage and understanding. She...

"I've been very lonely," she said. "Many times I would have called for you. I gave you time to see that your work would never be successful."

"I know," he said.

"You have not lost everything," she said, and pressed her slim body into his arms.

After they had kissed, she pushed him gently away.

"I did not want you to leave the others. They are in danger. The people will strike soon. They will destroy themselves because they are jealous. They will destroy you if you are not careful."

"We were doing good," he said. "We were trying to help."

She shook her head. All the knowledge of hate and love seemed locked in her brain.

"Each type hates the other," she said. "Each wishes to survive—alone. They hate each other, because from each other's standards, the others are horrible to look upon."

"I'm—not sure," he said slowly. "Maybe there is still time. Perhaps we can teach."

She shook her head.

"We must leave tonight for the first settlement," she said. "We may be in time to save your friends. I don't know."

"You wanted me to succeed, didn't you?" he asked gently.

There were tears in her eyes.

"So much that I was willing to be away from you until I was sure you couldn't," she said. "And now, we must hurry."

* * *

Phillip Stanton was worried about Cragg. Jim Cragg had been in the city of Many-Legs for a week. If Stanton had dared leave the laboratory, he would follow Cragg's footsteps south. He didn't dare. It had started the day Roger Warren left the first settlement. First a fire had broken out in the south end of the settlement. Men had run with urns to the

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river, but had failed to quench the flames.

Many of them had tried to break into the laboratory, but Stanton had locked the heavy shutters and they had not been able to enter. The first settlement was half destroyed. The people were on guard. This was war in its crudest, most horrible form. Man against men.

Stanton waited—and prayed. Prayed that Warren would come back in time. He knew that all their dreams were blasted. He had tried to build knowledge and love. He had succeeded in giving these people crude knives and the secret of fire. Two weapons of death. The tractor was their only escape now. Stanton was not afraid, but he wanted to live. If he lived, he might have another chance...

In the city of Many-Legs, one building only was burned to the ground. Its blackened timbers sprawled under the sun. The Many-Legs stood around it with wide eyed fascination. They had burned this school because they wanted to destroy what it stood for. They could not stand any memories of things that were beautiful or well formed. They destroyed something far more handsome than themselves, because they could never reach that physical perfection.

They looked on, not daring to enter the pile of still burning embers. They looked at the distorted, charred figure that was on its back, staring up at the sky with sightless eyes. This, then, was all that was left of Jim Cragg's school. This was Jim Cragg, teacher, and idealist, perished because he stood for something these people could not understand.

ROGER WARREN gunned the tractor and sped down across the hills toward the blazing settlement. Cries of revenge drifted up across the sunlit hills. Stark, burning timbers still stood, marking what had once been his dream, and the dreams of others like him. His body was covered with sweat.

The girl huddled close to him in the cab of the metallic monster. Her hands were in her lap. Tears moistened her eyes.

"I'm afraid we're too late," she said.

A vast army of men were fighting in the fields before the settlement. He plowed through them as though they did not exist. His eyes were red and he saw through that haze of blood. He gunned the tank, sending it roaring down the streets toward the laboratory building.

In front of the laboratory, surrounded by burning building, he stopped and leaped out. He fought against the door until it broke open and he sprawled across the floor on all fours.

He was too late.

The windows had been forced open. Phillip Stanton lay on his stomach, a knife pushed through between his shoulder blades.

Roger Warren knelt beside the grey haired man and drew the knife out. He turned the man on his back and closed his staring eyes with shaking fingertips. Under the body, letters had been scrawled on the floor.

"Escape if you can, Roger, and wait for a better day. There may yet be another opportunity."

Warren could hear the flames crackling over head. The roof was ablaze. He ran to the laboratory shelves and found a small, uncorked bottle. He opened it and poured it carefully around Stanton's corpse. Then he went to the door, leaving a trail of the stuff all the way to the street. He jumped into the cab, and

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without looking back, gunned the motors and sped north.

Behind him, the laboratory that had witnessed the rebirth of knowledge, felt the touch of flames. The liquid that Roger Warren had poured upon the floor, felt the heat of the flames and expanded suddenly under a mighty explosion. This was Phillip Stanton's cremation, and his body was forever saved from the fiendish knives of the people he had tried to save.

* * *

The long corridor was dark, save for the pale, greenish flow that came through the ice barrier which sealed the opening. The light bathed the ceiling, and shone on the long rows of pillers that supported it. Beyond the corridor, light could not penetrate. It would not touch there for a thousand years.

The man and the lovely girl, occupying two of the couches, were at rest. All the wires were in place. The feeder tubes were connected to their arms. Their hands were entwined, fingers pressed tightly together in love and trust for each other.

They had fallen asleep this way, with words of love on each other's lips. The girl understood. She knew that they would awaken again, safely together, and with the hope that there would be another time when they might bring a message of peace and hope to those who would inhabite the earth.

There was no movement. The silence was complete. Sometime, the motors would spring to life. The lenses that watched over them, would awaken and bathe their bodies with the heat of life.

It would take many years. Perhaps the world would never produce a race that could profit by learning. But the two faces were calm, and there was something on them that might give these two a better opportunity to succeed. There were two smiles of love...

THE END

Penetrating Arrows

★ By PETER BLOOP ★

TODAY IN our modern methods of warfare we have long forgotten the importance of the bow and arrow. Archery has been relegated to a position of historic discussion and hobby practice as a whole, although it is still used as a means of hunting sport by experts in the art.

And along these lines, the power of the driven arrow is something that has been both overrated and underrated at the same time. In the 18th century Moseley quoted Lord Bacon as saying that the Turkish bow was capable of shooting an arrow with such force that the head would penetrate a steel target or a piece of brass two inches thick. On the other hand, there are too many people who rate the bow and arrow as merely child's toys, and to be treated as such.

The facts of the matter are that a modern hunting arrow will upon striking a large animal, pass completely through it, unless a bone stops it. This is readily understood when we consider the fact that the arrow's kinetic energy is 50 foot-pounds. This type of arrow, if the head is well sharpened, will readily penetrate a thousand sheets of paper. This is comparable to penetrating a standard telephone directory of any large city! The same arrow, with a blunt, flat, steel head, will readily penetrate a solid inch of pine board.

These facts should be enough to show that the arrow is not only a toy, but a weapon of great striking power, possibly not as great a power as Lord Bacon is alleged to have attributed to it, but nevertheless enough to make us keep a modern 65lb. hunting bow locked up in the closet—away from inexperienced hands!

THE END

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Queen of the Living Puppets

by DON WILCOX

Janetto had a strange power; he could see the future. But Venzita, his girl musician really held the strings to his human puppets

ENOUGH was enough! The hooting and yelling had worn Dr. Janetto's sensitive nerves to snapping threads. And now, on the tenth night of the carnival's stay at this ancient metropolis, the riff-raff had begun throwing rocks.

"Get the manager!" Janetto shouted through the rear window of his house-trailer. "Tell him I'm through!"

"This ain't nothing!" the passing carnival hand retorted, moping off.

"Tell him I want my money. I'm through feeding pearls to swine!"

With that, Dr. Albert Janetto whirled about in his wheel-chair to the curtained entrance in the house-trailer's sidewalls. He hadn't had a customer all evening. The masses of beggars and scalawags who couldn't afford the price of a sideshow took their fun out in mocking hoots and laughter. A sorry state for the high arts of mysticism to fall into.

But such was the New Dark Ages! No appreciation of the finer things of

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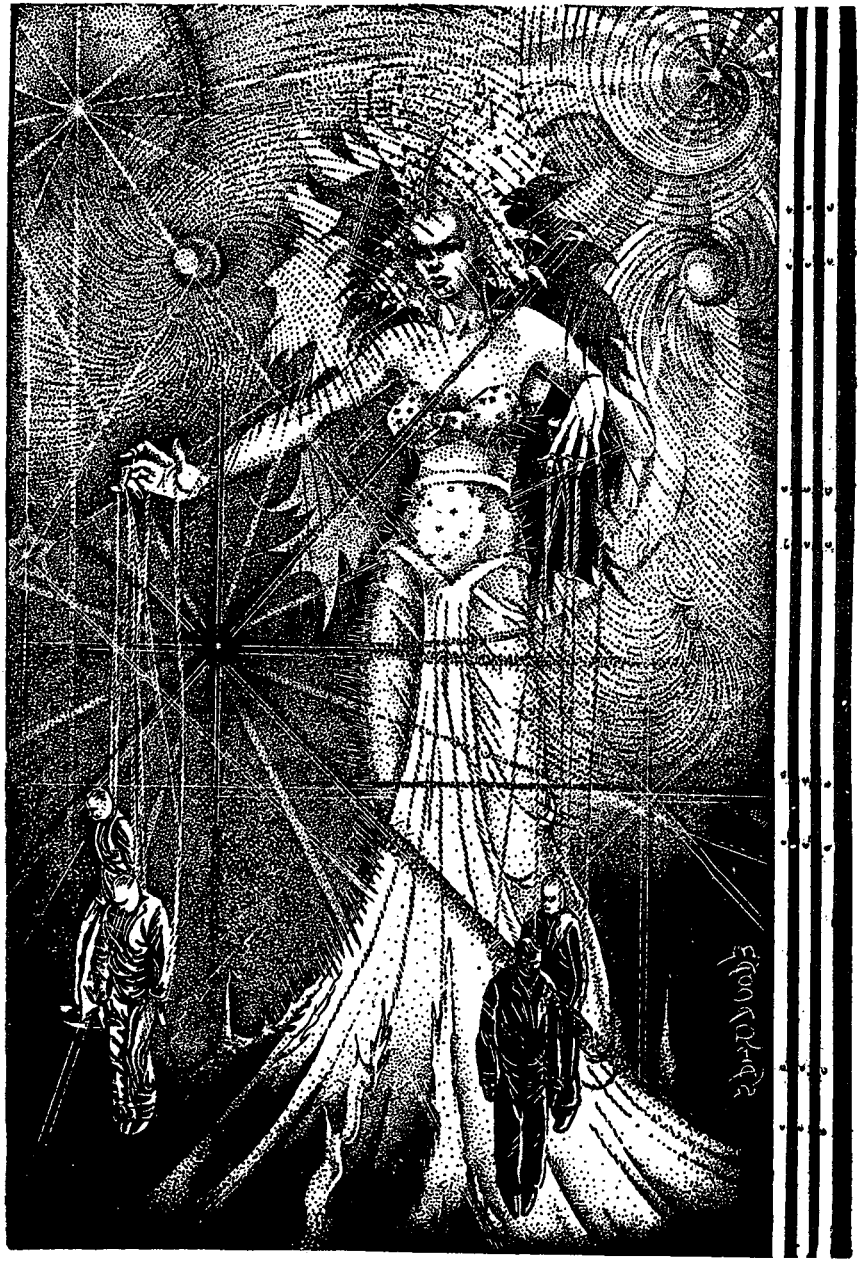

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life. Those crowds of beggars fairly gloated in their poverty and ignorance!

Janetto reached out through the open door, defying taunts and flying clods, and jerked in the battered tin sign, "PALACE OF VISIONS." He flung aside the curtains and slammed the house-trailer door closed with a jolt that knocked several boxes of incense off their shelves. He dragged out his suitcases and began packing . . .

At midnight he found a cheap hotel on the edge of the central business district. While he waited for the night clerk to make up the room, he wheeled along the lobby walls.

His thick eyelids fell to a thoughtful halfmast. He scarcely noticed the series of wall maps tracing the changes in the national boundaries brought about by World War II and the twenty years that followed. He was unconscious of the falling of chips of dirty mortar from the drafty patchwork of masonry in one corner of the room. Each time a heavy truck went by, the building shuddered, echoing the war days when shells had crashed through those walls.

Physically and mentally, Dr. Albert Janetto had been shattered no less than a war-torn building. For twenty years he had drifted about in this squeaky wheel-chair, groping vainly for snatches of pre-war security. In those days his mystic arts had promised a lucrative career. But now . . .

He reread the pencil-scrawled note the carnival manager had sent him with his check: "Here's your pay, Doc. You were a good sideshow while you lasted, but you haven't got enough carnival in your blood. You'll never get anywhere blowing up at a crowd. You've got to master them. That was never truer than now. These New Dark Ages are hardboiled, and the riff-raff piles up thicker on us at every new town. Good luck, Doc, and take my advice and climb down off your high-horse."

Below the manager's signature he had added a P.S. This was what Janetto reread several times.

"P.S. By the way, Doc, I never did know whether your racket was on the level. Some of your customers claimed it was. If so, why the hell don't you whip up a vision or two for yourself and see where you're going?"

The night clerk wheeled Janetto onto the elevator. A moment later he was alone in his room.

HE propelled himself across to the window, rose up on his crutches and locked it, then drew the shade to shut out most of the flickering night lights. Where the shade was torn he pinned a newspaper over it.

The big mirror leaning above the old-fashioned dresser distracted him, sending back the hard glitter of his coal-black eyes, the determined twist of his mouth, the sallow green of his close-shaved sensitive chin. He turned to one of the suitcases on the bed, opened it, drew out a wide purple velvet scarf. This he threw over the top of the mirror, allowing its glossy folds to droop down over the edges of the dresser.

From another case he took an assortment of short candles and some boxes of incense powders. He arranged the candles on a long aluminum tray, which he placed on the velvet-covered dresser, and lighted them.

Over the eleven sturdy blazes he fixed eleven dainty cup-like cylinders, and in each of these he poured a liberal sprinkling of powders. He snapped off the electric light to test the results. The eleven yellow blazes could no longer be seen. Instead, eleven small columns of red smoke rose, illuminated before the background of purple velvet. The room was all blackness except for those eleven slow-moving shafts of red smoke.

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Janetto drew a deep breath. The incense was strong in the air.

The twisting coils of smoke, so familiar to him from his years of mystic practice, engaged his eyes with some of the long lost freshness that had accompanied his earliest experiments. The charm was still there.

Without turning his head, he reached in the suitcase, passed his hand along the row of bottles, chose the one that contained the strongest elixir of visions. He uncorked it, drank deeply, tossed the empty bottle aside.

He took another long breath of the perfumed air, settled more comfortably in his wheel-chair, let his thick eyelids droop into dreamy relaxation. He waited.

Ten minutes passed. The elixir began to work. He felt the sluggish torpor engulf his sensitive nerves, felt the imagery of his relaxed eyes suddenly grow sharper. The weaving threads of smoke glowed out of the darkness in fuller contours. The fantastic shapes became a parade of figures, a passing show that formed and melted before his imaginative eyes.

He mumbled to himself. "Racket . . . on the level! Little did that manager realize! . . . Hell, the world's masters of science could come to me for clearer insights . . . if they weren't so damned conceited . . . My arts could open paths for magistrates and kings and presidents . . . For anyone that gets blinded by chaos . . . Even myself . . ."

His voice lowered to a whisper.

"What is *my* answer? . . . *How* can I sell my visions to the world? . . . *How* can I turn this knowledge into wealth and power? . . . *How?* . . . *How?* . . ."

MINUTES passed. Janetto's concentration grew more intense.

Suddenly the answer began to form. The red smoke thickened into meaningful shapes. A momentary pause in the swirl shot its suggestion home. The picture hung like a tableau somewhere between the background of purple velvet and dimmer eye of Janetto's brain. He drew in a sharp breath, closed his drooping eyelids, fixed the image in his mind.

He looked again. It was still there, not motionless but changing. Minor figures were coming and going past the granite pedestal on which the central figure stood.

The central figure was a beautiful young girl, dressed in a flowing purple gown. She was smiling, and there was the slightest touch of disdain in the curve of her lips and the arch of her eyebrows as she looked down on the passing figures.

In her hands she held an ancient Grecian lyre, which she stroked carelessly with her long slim fingers—and now Janetto imagined he could hear the faint tinkle of those weird strings.

At first the girl's beauty so fascinated him that he did not see what the minor figures had to do with the picture. But at once he was startled to notice his own hand—it had to be his own, for it wore the same topaz ring, bore the same vein markings; the hand passed across the side of the pedestal to gather up the bags of money that the passing figures placed there at the feet of the girl.

Then, as the vision began to fade, Janetto caught the last detail. The procession of persons, mostly men who were so magnetized by the girl's beauty that they laid offerings of gold at her feet, passed on through an entrance over which hung an old battered tin sign hung with diamond-studded nails . . .

For a time the vision screen was almost black. Janetto began to whisper to himself, "Where do I find her? . . .

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Where do I find her? . . . She is undoubtedly the most beautiful girl in the land . . . But where? . . ."

The red strands of smoke began to weave a landscape of rolling hills, distant mountains . . .

CHAPTER II

A Reunion

IT was a sunny morning in the narrow mountain-flanked grasslands known as the Blue Valley. It was a morning for making hay, and Rustan's strong young arms wielded the pitchfork with practiced skill. The horses kept the old hay wagon lumbering along just fast enough for Rustan to keep up a sweat.

He finished a windrow, was about to start on the next one, when he looked across the fence to see a hiker coming along the highway.

Rustan turned the horses to rest facing the breeze. He ambled over to the fence, stripped off a sliver of wood to chew on while he waited for the figure to approach. Rustan never missed a chance to talk with a drifter. He was, in fact, a drifter himself by birth, though the charm of Blue Valley had rooted him down for the time being.

"It's a girl!" he said to himself. Then as she came closer, he called, "Hi, there! where's your limousine?"

"Left it back in the ditch," said the girl.

"Chauffeur?"

"Same ditch," the girl retorted without smiling. "Where can I get water?"

She looked warm in her knitted green jersey and faded moleskin trousers rolled up at the ankles. Her fluffy red hair was damp at the edges of her forehead. Her lips were slightly swollen.

"Right this way, madam," said Rustan, "I've got a jug in the wagon. Say . . ."

He looked sharply at her clear dark eyes, the dainty curves of her face. There was something damned familiar—

She crossed the barbed-wire fence with a rugged grace that proved she was a veteran drifter. She caught up the burlap-covered water jug with a hooked finger and rested its weight on her folded arm as she drank.

Her face suddenly drew back from the lips of the jug. "I know you!" she cried. "You're Rustan!"

His eyes brightened. "Are you—Mary? The kid I used to play with down in the west-side jungles? I'll be damned!"

He gave a yell of delight, tossed the water jug to the wagon, grabbed her and kissed her. She laughed and tousled his hair and beat him on the shoulders with her fists the way she had used to do when they were kids. Then she drew back with mock dignity.

"Here, here! You're taking advantage, kissing a girl before she has time to get her guard up. I ought to punch you."

"Hell, I was so glad to see you!" Rustan paused, looking at her intently. How she had changed in five years! She must be all of sixteen! Rustan twinkled. "If I'd really meant it for a serious kiss, I'd have kissed you *this* way—"

She pushed him away with a toss of her arm and laughed, "No you don't. I'm a lady now, even if I don't dress like it. I'm entitled to men's respect, and believe me, laddie, I'm getting it."

"In the drifters' jungles?"

"Your darn right." Mary looked at him steadily. "You know how it is. There's plenty of us been uprooted in the last few years, and set a-drifting with no homes or families; but some of the oneriest beggars in the jungles still have enough decency to put up a scrap

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when a girl needs a friend."

"Hmm. What made you leave the jungles?"

The girl arched an eyebrow. "Too much scrapping." She took another drink of water. "Beside, you know what I've always said. When I grew up I'd get a job . . . I hear that times are getting better in some of the cities the other side of the mountains."

"You won't like a job."

"I might."

"Stay here and take a job on this hay wagon," Rustan suggested.

"Give me a pitchfork."

SHE took the extra fork and went to work. They finished loading the hay wagon, sat in the shade of it and ate lunch, and talked over the world's problems.

A third voice interrupted their discussion—the growl of the sour-faced old hired man.

"What's *she* doing here?"

"Working here," Rustan grinned. "She's a friend of mine."

"You and your friends are getting too thick around here." Sour-face lighted a pipe and sat down beside them. He scowled at the girl. "The government'll have to do something about all these drifters."

"The government better do something about the government," Rustan retorted. "What *is* the government anyhow? A bunch of police in each city, run by a bunch of magistrates, to keep a bunch of barons in the dough. The *big* governments have gone out like soap bubbles."

"Maybe so," said Sour-face. "But up here in Blue Valley we don't care how many governments go out or come in, so long as they don't pan their troubles off on us."

Rustan was satisfied to let this point stand. Nowhere in all his hitchhiking travels had he found a more serene or self-sufficient place than this bit of valley. He liked it here.

Sour-face rose. "You'd better send that girl away before the boss and his wife get back this afternoon."

"I'm going to make them give her a job," said Rustan. "They'll do it, too."

"I'm warning you!"

"Go plow your potatoes before I jab you with a pitchfork!" Rustan emphasized his words by reaching for a fork, and old Sour-face hobbled away.

Rustan turned to Mary. "I'm in dead earnest about that job. The boss and his wife'll fall for you. You'd like it here—I hope."

The girl's eyes snapped at him like firecrackers. "So you've settled down! I'm surprised, after the way you used to talk. You had so much drifter in your blood you were getting out and set the world on fire."

Rustan plowed an uneasy hand through his shaggy brown hair. "We had a lot of big ideas, didn't we? But it looks like the New Dark Ages have got a choke-hold on us. We won't live to see the century that the world shakes out of it. So here I am making hay in Blue Valley. How about staying with me, kid?"

"Maybe . . . I had my heart set on crashing some city across the mountains for a job. But if I could save up a little cash first, to get some clothes—"

"It's safe and peaceful up here," Rustan mused. "In these times you never know what's going to happen in the cities."

"If you think your boss and his wife would like me well enough to hire me for a few weeks—"

"I'm sure of it, Mary!"

TWO weeks later Mary rode away in a station wagon driven by a uniformed chauffeur and occupied by an

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elderly crippled man with a crisp authoritative voice and masterful manners.

The station wagon had come up into the driveway without warning, Rustan learned from the sour-faced hired man. There had been a few minutes' talk about a mysterious job and the girl had agreed to leave at once.

"She said she would stop and tell you goodbye if she saw you in the field," Sour-face told the staggered young man. "And if she didn't see you I was to give you all her love and kisses."

So that was that.

Rustan went back to work, but his heart wasn't in it.

And for the next three years he had no heart for work of any kind. He drifted back and forth across the continent, scouring every city for some wisp of information about a lost girl named Mary. His search was fruitless.

He tried repeatedly to get work, but there was no work.

At length he joined that growing group of cynical and vicious drifters called the Rag Birds, who made it their pet sport to climb the trees in the parks to mock at the respectable people who passed beneath.

And like the other Rag Birds, he accustomed his eyes to the ugliness of ragged clothes and unshaven faces and dirt and hunger, and sharpened his ears to the hollow ring of every noble sentiment uttered by a well-fed magistrate.

CHAPTER III

Mozambique Has a Vision

MAGISTRATE MOZAMBIQUE was off on his summer vacation. He was having a high old time. Or, as he would later tell his fellow magistrates, he was getting the pleasurable restoration that his over-wrought nervous constitution so badly needed.

Magistrate Mozambique had a nose like a baked apple and ears like pancakes—but, as every important citizen and thousands of non-important Rag Birds in one of the continent's oldest cities were well aware, the magistrate had a very tender eye for beauty.

When Mozambique first laid eyes on the beautiful Venzita, strumming her silver-plated guitar with the languid air of an artist lost to all save her music, a visible shudder rocked his overstuffed frame. He elbowed his way through the crowd.

He paused, touched by a conflict of random emotions—a jubilation at his discovery, a certain sadness that such a beautiful creature should be exposed to the gaze of so many onlookers obviously inferior to himself, an unfathomable yearning to know who this creature was and where she came from, and a slightly pained awareness that her guitar was out of tune.

"Venzita!" He murmured the name over to himself, smiling stageward as his lips moved. The girl's eyes momentarily swept across him. He caught his breath.

Then the song was over, the girl disappeared in the wings, and a little old man in a wheel-chair moved out on the stage. After a moment, Mozambique managed to turn his eyes upon this newcomer, though it was like focusing upon a dark object immediately after a dazzling light has flashed across one's eyes.

The man in the wheel-chair had a sharp, cunning face, heavy eyelids, a sharp little beard that grew—or stuck on—at an impertinent angle.

Magistrate Mozambique listened to the little old man's crisp words . . . What's this . . . Your p r o b l e m s solved by visions? . . . Rats . . . Mozambique had no problems. He was

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on his vacation.

What's that? . . . The beautiful Venzita entertains with her melodious music while you await the preparation of the vision stage? Ah, that's different! . . . After all, there were many disturbing problems in the back of any magistrate's mind . . . There were bound to be . . . A vision would be the very thing . . . Twenty-five dollars? A mere nothing. Solve some of the city's problems—let the city pay the bill! A perfect set-up . . .

Late that night, after Mozambique returned to his hotel, he jotted a few items in his official expense book. The vision *had* been a worth-while investment, he was sure, for at the time it had clarified for him some courses of action that had kept him and the other magistrates deadlocked for several weeks—indeed, had forced him to take a vacation.

Just what solutions the visions gave him for those deadlocks he did not bother to record. They had become a bit fuzzy in his mind. The real business of the evening had been the dinner to which he had treated Venzita and—er—what was his name?—oh, yes, the eminent Dr. Albert Janetto.

The dinner a success? Mozambique should hope to say it was! He had secured from the doctor a solemn promise. The doctor and his charming protege would come to Mozambique's city and appear before the magistrates assembled. The doctor had accepted an advance from the city's funds to clinch the deal . . .

TWELVE days later Magistrate Mozambique took extreme pleasure in making an introduction and proposing a toast.

"To our guests of the evening, the erudite sage, Dr. Albert Janetto, and his beautiful, charming, fascinating, and—er—*beautiful*—ugh!—stop me if I said that before, but it's well worth repeating—to his *beautiful* protege, Venzita!"

Sixteen glasses lifted and sixteen magisterial gullets swallowed wine. Then the waiters brought on the feast, and the capital dining hall rang with knives and forks and gaiety. Sixteen magistrates listened to the gems of wisdom from the little old man in the wheel-chair, and vied with each other in a contest of wits to win approving smiles from the girl . . .

A few weeks later the same sixteen eager magistrates stood on the broad portico of the capital building and watched the builders construct the new "Temple of Visions."

Each day they looked out upon the rising walls, they congratulated themselves. This was the initial step in their new program of national culture. In spite of the New Dark Ages, they would make this capital a city of beauty!

"The City of Beauty!"

At every gateway in the city's walls they had mammoth electric signs erected to announce their reputation to the world.

And when the thousands of Rag Birds, perched in trees, heard the city's new name they laughed and laughed. They poked fun at themselves and their own dirt and misery. "Look at us!" They would shout to respectable passers-by. "We're your ornaments!" We're sittin' up here to make your city beautiful. Whoopee! Ain't we the gorgeous things!"

The magistrates, needless to say, were nettled by these ugly taunts. They took the matter up with Dr. Albert Janetto's visions. Under the spell of perfumes and colored smokes and powerful potions they dreamed up an answer to this trifling trouble. Pri-

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vate cabs for magistrates.

The appropriation was made, the private cabs were manufactured—comfortable, luxurious, and so thoroughly sound-proof that no Rag Bird's taunt could penetrate their walls. Wherewith, the magistrates congratulated themselves on having rid themselves of a disturbance.

In six months the new Temple of Visions was complete to the last gold doorknob. Mozambique strutted through its marble walled rooms with the air of a hotel proprietor followed by fifteen stockholders—his fellow magistrates. The sixteen were pleased with themselves. It was a masterpiece of extravagance.

"But definitely an investment!" they continually reminded themselves.

"Ah, yes!" said the little man in the wheel-chair. "This is an investment you shall never regret. You have been wise enough to recognize higher values. Visions can be of unlimited help to you. You have the ponderous weight of government on your shoulders. But I am now at your service—yours to command."

"Exactly!" said Mozambique. "You and your visions are to us what the special commissions were to the governments of the past—a special device for supplying those invaluable insights—"

"Precisely," another magistrate chimed in. And another, "Shall we drink to the beginning of a new era?"

"To an era of wisdom and beauty!"

"To beauty!" others echoed . . .

DR. ALBERT JANETTO watched the sixteen men march back over the ornate arched passage high over the street from his new temple to their capital building. He took a deep comfortable breath, closed his thick eyelids. Then in spite of himself he burst into laughter.

"I have arrived!" he chuckled, and his laughter trailed off in a deep, satisfied rumble. "By the gods of wit, I have arrived! And how? On a silver platter borne by sixteen stupid, silly—"

A young attendant picking up the empty glasses, turned sharply and glared. Janetto had been unaware of his presence. He found the glare disturbing, it made the blood rush to his face the way the hoots of the beggars and drifters had used to do back in the carnival days.

But Dr. Janetto was too jubilant over his mounting victories to let a mere capital attendant annoy him. His eyes narrowed sullenly.

"Run along, you!" he barked. "Get back to the capital building where you belong."

"I beg your pardon, your honor," said the young attendant. "I was about to ask you a question concerning your famous visions."

Janetto's eyes snapped open sharply. "What about them?"

"I've heard that they are very reliable, your honor, and I wondered—will anyone besides the magistrates ever have a chance to benefit by them?"

"Who, for instance?"

"Me?"

Janetto considered. He was under no contract to devote his vision facilities exclusively to the magistrates. On the other hand, he had no intention of letting any Tom, Dick, or Harry in on the pie.

But Albert Janetto was in a spot. This young man, he knew, had just overheard a dangerous tongue-slip of his. And Janetto didn't care to have an attendant go back to the capital building and report that the magistrates had been referred to as *stupid* and *silly*—

"I am always glad to exchange favors with worthy persons," he said. "When would you like to avail yourself of a

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visit to the vision room?"

"Now."

"It is customary," said Janetto, thinking that he might put this young man off, "to precede the visions with a period of soft music. But at the moment my musician, the lovely Venzita, is sleeping. I would not wake her—"

"I'll dispense with the music," said the young man. "I'm not interested in any of the trimmings. All I want is a forecast—"

"You have no doubt heard Venzita's music already?" The doctor rolled along in his new electrically-operated wheel-chair toward the vision room.

"No, I'm new here."

"You have a treat in store," Janetto smiled reflectively. "Your name?"

"Hobart."

THE doctor paused, opening the door to the newly furnished oval room. This young man was handsome in his well-pressed simple black attire. He looked as if he wouldn't be long outgrowing an attendant's uniform. His lean face, his sharp bespectacled eyes, his trim mustache and determined lips gave him the look of a man who had a destiny.

These observations sent a slight shudder through the little doctor and he regretted more than ever having made the slip that put him under obligation to this man.

But all men have their weaknesses, Janetto thought, smiling contentedly within himself.

"I'm sorry you haven't seen the lovely Venzita," he said, wheeling into the oval-shaped vision room ahead of Hobart. "Many insist on offering her magnificent gifts."

"So I've heard," said Hobart with a touch of disdain. "This temple of visions *is* a magnificent gift, your honor!"

Janetto turned in anger. "This temple is no gift! It's an investment!"

"I heard the magistrates say so," the handsome attendant laughed lightly, and Janetto detected a tinge of sneer in his mirth. "I quite agree with you that the magistrates are stupid, silly fools—"

"Don't be hasty in your interpretation!" the doctor snapped. "My remark meant no harm! You're jumping at false conclusions."

"What conclusion is there except that you've duped the all highest government officials in this capital into spending a million for a mansion for you?"

"You're talking wild!" the doctor cried. He was halfway out of his wheel-chair, his tense fingers extending like claws.

"Take it easy," the young man growled, planting his hands on his hips. "If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. You don't have to explode—"

"Listen, my friend," Janetto slipped back into his chair and his voice toned down to a confidential half-whisper. "You have an intelligent face. You're smart enough to keep your thoughts to yourself. There's no reason I shouldn't tell you exactly what I meant—then you'll know there was no harm intended."

Hobart's lips curled into a faint smile. "Well?"

"Some of those magistrates *are* silly—about my musician Venzita. They want to marry her. Oh, they don't say so, of course. Venzita is too clever. They never get far talking with her. But I, with my insight, can read their intentions. Some of them would murder their wives if they had a chance to marry Venzita. And that would be very foolish."

Janetto's frail chest heaved with relief as he divested himself of this speech. He concluded, "Now you see why I used the words silly, stupid?"

"The Temple of Visions had nothing

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to do with it?"

"Nothing."

"The visions, then, are bona fide?"

"Absolutely. Just sit here, my friend. Let me prepare the incense and the lights and you'll see for yourself. If you aren't overwhelmed by the psychological insights you receive, I'll eat this temple, stone by stone."

"Go ahead," said Hobart. "Insights are exactly what I want."

DR. JANETTO wheeled to the arched windows, pressed a switch. All of the red velvet draperies slowly drew across the stained glass panes. The oval room became a cavern of soft green light, the source of which was an intricate spider web of fine illumined tubes that spread across the curved ceiling.

The motored wheel-chair glided to the front of the room. A touch of Janetto's hand brought a soft reddish glow from the base of what appeared to be an arched proscenium, crenelated along the floor of the stage with footlight shields of weird shapes.

The red smoke began to rise in sluggish columns from the row of weird-shaped shields to float upward along the folds of purple velvet that filled the proscenium. Janetto caused the overhead web of green to fade into blackness. The oval room was now as dark as if illuminated by a single candle, glowing through red glass. The dim red glow, visible only as it reflected from the seeping wall of smoke, softened the sharpness of Hobart's eyes, melted the skepticism of his tight lips.

Janetto wheeled down to Hobart's luxurious chair, placed a small uncorked bottle and a silver-engraved goblet on the ebony shelf attached to the arm of the chair.

"Drink," he said, "as deeply as you care to. In the same measure will come your visions."

Hobart's caution had not all melted with the lights. "If I don't drink, then what? No visions?"

"That will depend upon you. I cannot guarantee—"

"You might have put poison in this bottle," said Hobart. "By mistake, of course."

"No men are ever suspicious of my vision potion," Janetto said tartly, "excepting men of evil intentions. However, you need not drink. The incense that fills this room will be strong enough in itself. I only ask that you relax, and watch the wall of red smoke with half-closed eyes—*and think upon what you see.*"

Janetto moved away to the side of the room, the lids fell slowly over the hot coals of his eyes, he breathed with the slow rhythm of sleep.

Hobart reached for the goblet, emptied the bottle into it, d r a i n e d it through his lips. He took a full relaxing breath, let his shoulders droop, let his hands fall limp over the arms of the chair. Then to make his comfort complete, he kicked off his narrow attendant's shoes and wriggled his toes against the lush carpet. He let his eyes go half closed.

Soon the softly glowing wall of perfumed smoke began to suggest pictures to him. He saw figures twist through the sluggish red coils, to rise and disappear. Stars and globes and fairy-like fancies of his mind mingled with the creeping, contorting waves of light against the deep velvety background.

The little balls of light took on clearer edges.

Now one of them hung in the center of the vision. It was a badge—the badge of a magistrate!

Back of it rose the black well-pressed attire of a capital attendant—his own suit that he was now wearing! Yes, *his*

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face was there too—and it stayed. *It and the badge.* But strangely the attendant's costume floated away.

Only his face and the badge were left!

Hobart gave a start. There could be no mistaking that! And secretly he knew that it was the very ambition that crowded his mind every hour of the day. *He would become a magistrate!*

THE vision stage darkened as Hobart's thought whirled dizzily. He muttered to himself, "But how can that be? There are already sixteen magistrates. Sixteen is the limit—"

The vision grew clear again, as if in answer to the turmoil in his mind. He saw the towering white-haired Van Hise, the oldest magistrate of all, marching along briskly—a hale and hearty old man.

Then, against the background of swirling smoke, something happened to Van Hise. He apparently tripped, he fell. He did not rise. The visions melted away.

A surge of excitement warmed Hobart's brain. He had the impulse to spring up, to get into action. If he were to become a magistrate he must start preparing himself at once. No telling how soon that venerable old Van Hise might stumble into death.

But Hobart could not manage to rise. As yet the torpor from the potion still held his body in its grip. He sank back in the chair, dizzy with magnificent ponderings.

Once more the vision came back to him. The strands of smoke wrapped into a braid of red rope that turned and coiled and lengthened into a human form. The head assumed the clearly etched lines of a girl's face, framed in a flamboyant butterfly head-dress of green and white feathers.

The girl's languid arms reached out to strum the strings of a huge golden harp.

Breathlessly Hobart watched. He had never seen the beautiful Venzita face to face, but the newspapers had often carried her pictures. There was no mistaking the loveliness of her face and figure, the enchanting grace with which her long slender fingers stroked the strings of the harp.

But suddenly the harp was not there. only the strings. What was this astonishing change?

Now the strings hung from her fingers, swung low to support the weights that were—what? *Men?* No, *puppets!*

Yes, two or three puppets dangled from each hand, and the girl manipulated the strings deftly, gracefully, with an ease that lent something of rapture to her manner. The puppets were magistrates!

Hobart looked from one to another of the doll-like figures. There was Mozambique. Here was Samos. There, Nicholas, Botticelli, Alboin . . . Now Mozambique had changed into Wyatt, Samos had melted away and in his place hung Ponchar. It was a veritable roll call of the magistrates! Eleven—twelve—thirteen of them, now fourteen.

Every magistrate but Van Hise and one other had appeared. And now the other came. Only Van Hise remained to come—or was he dead? Would the sixteenth puppet be Van Hise—*or Hobart?*

Hobart leaped up, shook off the blur before his eyes, slapped his own cheeks to bring himself out of the torpor. He bent down, seized his shoes, stormed out the rear door, hissing to himself, *"She'll never get me! Never!"*

Janetto hurried after him. "But did you see a significant vision, my friend?"

"I did!" Hobart retorted, slipping his feet into his shoes and hurrying on. He

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crossed through the marble hallway. In a quick glance to one side he saw the girl he had just seen in the vision—tall, langurous, unspeakably beautiful as she turned to look at him, her wealth of red hair sweeping against the white marble pillar. He caught up the tray of glasses and directed his footsteps straight toward the little arched footbridge that crossed high over the street to the capital building.

CHAPTER IV

Another Temple

VENZITA sauntered through the hallway to meet Janetto.

"Who was that?"

"A capital attendant," Janetto answered. "Did you have a good nap, my dear?"

"What was his name?"

"Probably Francisco or William or—no, on second thought, it was Hobart. What, *more* flowers, my dear?" Janetto cast a sour eye upon the mass of floral decorations that flanked the stage in the music room. "I wish to repeat my request—that you ask your magistrate friends to send more jewelry and fewer flowers."

"Hobart," Venzita mused. "He was rather handsome."

"Flowers are here today and gone tomorrow. Jewels—"

"It's a shame he's only attendant. I think he should have a promotion. I'll speak to one of the magistrates."

"Venzita, come here. I want to talk with you." He directed the motored wheel-chair to an open roof-porch that overlooked the capital grounds. Venzita shrugged her shoulders and strolled after him.

"Look, Venzita. What do you see out there?"

Venzita laughed. She saw the city, of course. What was he getting at? She saw the capitol grounds, and the new post-war apartments and skyscrapers, and the extensive post-war groves and orchards loaded down with fruit and clusters of Rag Birds, and the business streets rumbling with cars and trucks, and the city walls out at the edges.

"That's ours," said Janetto with a low satisfied chuckle. "All ours—*if* we work it right."

"You're doing pretty well," said Venzita cynically.

"We've got these magistrates in the hollow of our hands and that's where we'll keep them. We must never for one minute let down or they'll lose interest."

"You're not worried about somehting, are you, Albert?"

Worried? Albert Janetto never dared admit it to her but he was deathly worried every time she asked the name of some handsome man who happened to pass their way. "No, not worried," he said dryly.

She studied his mysterious old face, the deep eyes that burned with untold secret motives. She laughed. "You can't be worried Not after the magistrates have erected a million dollar temple to your arts! You're a part of the government now. They'll never let you go. Even if I should leave you some day, you're here—fixed—just like that capitol building!"

Janetto caught her hand, held it with a curious tenseness that made her grow thoughtful. She looked down at the gnarled old fingers and let her eyes rest on the brilliant topaz ring that reflected her face in miniature.

"Venzita!" he uttered the name in a whisper that was half reverence, half fear. "Don't ever dream of leaving! Don't even let yourself think of such a thing!"

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VENZITA drew her hand away and strolled along the portico. Janetto had never ceased to be a mystery to her. Didn't he realize that she had some purpose of her own?

He followed after her. "My dear, can't you forget that you began working for me simply as a hired musician? Hasn't my treatment of you proved that you are more than an employee?"

"You've always been very kind to me, Janetto. I hope I've never complained—"

"But don't you see, you're a part of the institution—an important part. Your music and your beauty have created the atmosphere necessary for our success. If you ever left me—"

"You'd get another musician—probably a better one."

"No! No! No!" Janetto fairly shrieked. "I'm trying to tell you this temple belongs to you as well as me. All these gifts—jewels, money, cars, precious stones—they're ours *jointly!* Can't I make you understand?"

"No, you old funny face, you'd just as well save your breath." Venzita stalked away from him, then turned when she heard him speeding after her in his wheel-chair. "If I have to tell you fifty more times, I'll say the same thing, Albert."

She stopped his wheel-chair with her foot, took his two crusty old hands in hers. "When you rolled out into the sticks a few years ago and told me there was a job waiting for me, I took it as a business proposition. You said my pay would be plenty of good food, fine clothes, a decent place to live, all the music lessons I wanted and all the protection I needed."

"Yes, but—"

"Well, that bargain still stands. My job is to furnish music for your customers. I don't intend to walk out on that job—at least not right away. I'm having too much fun. I've just learned to play that new harp *in tune*. So there, grandpa!"

She laughed in Janetto's face and waited for the twinkle to light his mysterious dark eyes. It was slow coming.

"You won't fall in love with any of these magistrates, Venzita?"

"Of course not!"

"Or anyone else?"

"You know no one's going to break through the defenses you've built!"

Janetto's complacent smile returned. Then his sharp-bearded chin gave a dogged thrust. "And you *will* request jewelry instead of flowers?"

"I'll do nothing of the kind!" Venzita said flatly—not with venom, simply with frank decision. "If they want to act like fools and throw their wealth at my feet, it's yours to pick up. I won't touch it!"

Janetto countered with a hurt face. He let his head fall, and touched his outspread fingers to his brow, flicking a cunning glance from under his heavy eyebrows.

The girl repeated, "I won't touch it, Albert. Not even for you—much as I love you."

Then she marched away from him murmuring to herself. "Or do I? Sometimes I wonder . . ."

CHAPTER IV

Hobart's Future Comes True

THOUGH the brisk old magistrate Van Hise was well up in years, no one guessed that he had only a few more months to live.

One night he died—quite suddenly—after a too hearty dinner in the capital dining room.

Three weeks later the capital and surrounding countryside were agog to learn that a young man named Hobart

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had been appointed to the vacancy.

Qualified? Yes, indeed!

In the first place he was experienced in capital affairs. In recent weeks he had run through a startling series of promotions, from attendant to Assistant Administrator of Expenditures. His rapid rise was almost unaccountable. But, as the newspapers blandly noted, he was a favorite of the influential Mozambique, who had often mentioned to the charming musician Venzita, that this energetic young man deserved a chance.

Moreover, Hobart was especially qualified to fill Van Hise's shoes. By some strange coincident Hobart had done extensive studies along the lines of Van Hise's legislative specialties.

Finally, Hobart was a hero, riding the crest of popularity. He was the brave man who had dared to disperse the mob of Rag Birds when they tried to march, a thousand strong, up the steps of the capital building.

That dash of boldness had made banner headlines and sensational newsmovies. Before the capital guards had lifted a hand, Hobart had appeared on the capital portico at the top of the hundred broad steps the mobsters were ascending, and stirred up an argument with them through the medium of a small powerful machine gun that chanced to be in his hands.

The Rag Birds had scattered and taken flight, and those that were too slow about it were carted away to visit hospitals or mortuaries. And a few of the leaders were induced to pay respects to the hangman. All of which made Hobart's popularity skyrocket. For there were far too many Rag Birds, as every respected and affluent citizen knew, and a busier hangman would mean a more beautiful city.

HOBART was made a magistrate. Mozambique pinned the badge on him. Samos, Nicholas and Botticelli made speeches. Janetto delivered an address from his wheel-chair. And there was entrancing harp music the rest of the evening, interspersed with toasts and lively conversation.

"Our City of Beauty is a torchlight in the new age of darkness," a newspaper editorialized. "This man Hobart, like the old go-getters of many decades ago, has risen from the ranks to a position of supreme importance. What Hobart has done, *any* citizen of this fair city could do—if he only had the *will*. Yes, even a Rag Bird, if he were determined enough!"

Clusters of Rag Birds laughed and laughed when they found that one in the newspaper.

"Imagine us," they hooted, "being made magistrates. What a hell of a sight we'd make, sitting around in the capital building throwing away money and listening to vampires play on harps! Ye gods, they're killing us!"

One lean-faced young Rag Bird scratched his shaggy head thoughtfully. "A Rag Bird *could* get to be a magistrate if he wanted to bad enough." He munched an apple authoritatively.

"Listen at that! Rustan's off again!" one of the cluster shouted.

"But he *could*. I'd bet my neck on it!" Rustan said, spitting out an apple seed.

"You'd lose your neck if you tried," retorted a heap of rags, climbing up the tree to sit in on the argument. "The only way a Rag Bird'd have a chance with those big shots would be for him to shoot down some other Rag Birds."

"Sure," someone else chimed in, munching on a piece of bark. "That's how that damned Hobart made the grade—by killing some of us off, and getting Plank and some others hanged."

"Plank was my friend as much as yours," Rustan said stubbornly, "but

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he was a fool to lead a mob up the capital steps. I tried to warn him and he wouldn't listen."

"I s'pose if you'd have been a magistrate you'd have had him hanged, same as Hobart did."

"I probably would have," said Rustan thoughtfully. "They've got it figured out that there's too many of us. I think they're right."

"Listen at him talk! Don't argue with him, the damned contrary mule." "If there's too many of us, why the hell don't the government do something about us?"

"Why should it?" said Rustan. "We never do anything about ourselves. We're satisfied to sit in the trees and throw apple-cores at the people that pass, aren't we?"

THE conversation was interrupted by a fight over an apple. Arguments were good but fights were always better. The surrounding trees poured out their occupants to gather around the dust storm where two Rag Birds had fallen and were going at each other with fists and claws.

Later, when the dust had cleared and the contestants were busy tying up their torn clothes and some rude third party was contentedly munching the prize they had fought over, Rustan's argument came back into the limelight. One of his contentious friends had a snarl left over from the previous talk.

"If you're so damned sure of yourself, Rustan, why don't you turn yourself into a magistrate?"

"Haw! Haw!" Rustan retorted dryly. "You think *I'd* crawl down from my perch to grovel on my hands and knees before a pretty girl—the way a magistrate does? You couldn't hire me!"

"Sour grapes!"

"What I mean, she's got every one of those magistrates on a toboggan," Rustan grinned. He lay back on the branch, hands locked behind his head, and gazed up into the sky. "She's an enchantress, that's what she is. Every man that comes her way is her slave. It was a lucky day for me that she walked out on me."

"You know Venzita?" Four of them asked the question at once.

"I used to know her, when her name was Mary." Rustan chuckled bitterly. "But don't worry, boys, I'll never know her again!"

CHAPTER V

Mozambique Meets His Master

THE money was ready. The plans were complete. Every single magistrate was ready to go ahead with the gigantic project—except—Hobart.

Mozambique led him by the arm past the walls of blueprints. This new three-million-dollar edifice would make the City of Beauty the most renowned of all the continent's capitals—the leader of culture in an age of darkness.

"You're too practical, Hobart. You haven't the proper appreciation of beauty. Now you take Magistrate Samos. At first he was dubious, like you—"

"I know," said Hobart. "He went to tell that damned little wizard Janetto about his doubts, had a sparkling conversation with Venzita, and came back insisting that another wing be added to the original plan."

"Consider the case of Wyatt," said Mozambique. "He is one of our most conservative magistrates, and yet—"

"I know about Wyatt," Hobart retorted. "He attended a banquet with Venzita and her mystic grandpa and came back with big ideas about adding an Italian garden with fountains and a

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ceiling of artificial stars."

"All these men are cautious about dipping into the city's treasury—except for the worthiest of purposes."

"Puppets!" Hobart muttered. "Simply puppets."

"Magistrate Alboin was hesitant at first. He objected to clearing the business streets and four blocks of apartments for the site. But after he discovered how the buildings were aging—"

"And how beautiful Venzita looked in that new gown that's three-fourths sapphires—he saw the light."

"He saw the light!" Mozambique cleared his throat. He was getting nowhere. The other magistrates were impatient with him because he had failed to swing his young protege into line.

"Did it ever occur to you, Mozambique, that this girl has turned the whole bunch of you into spineless jellyfish?"

Ignoring the remark, Mozambique flopped into a chair and beat his fists on the arms. "What are we going to do with you, Hobart?" he cried in exasperation. "We can't quit at a Temple of Visions. We've got to go on—build a Temple of Music—eventually a Temple of Art. Why the devil can't you give us your vote, so we can go ahead?"

"Save your voice," Hobart growled. "You need a unanimous vote. I'm voting against you. You're stymied, that's all." Then with a note of sarcasm, he added. "If you're so wrought up about it why don't you and the other magistrates go to Doc Janetto and get a vision and see what can be done?"

"No good."

"A million-dollar Temple of Visions *no good?*"

"You know what I mean." Mozambique mopped the perspiration from his baked-apple nose and his pancake ears. "Not one of us fifteen magistrates can go to Janetto now. Not until we've voted the appropriation. We can't face Venzita. Every damned magistrate has promised her he's railroading this Temple of Music through as a special private favor to her."

"Tsk, tsk, Mozam! Nice business!"

"Shut your head and let me think."

WHICH was as far as Mozambique could get during the next twenty-four hours. He came up before the assembled magistrates with plenty of perspiration but no inspiration.

"We'll take one more vote," he said in a voice that tolled the death of his dream of culture.

They cast their ballots. The count was the same as before—fifteen for, one against.

"That settles it," said Mozambique. "The Temple of Music is lost."

"I move," said one of the magistrates, "that Hobart be delegated to convey this news to our official court musician, Venzita."

"I gladly volunteer," Hobart snapped contemptuously.

A crash of glass brought the magistrates to their feet. Stones burst through the windows and glanced off their conference table. The magistrates scurried back to the walls and columns for protection, and Hobart reached for a pistol.

"Hold it!" shouted one of the guards from outside the window. "We've got 'em! Damned Rag Birds!"

A clatter of head-beatings and fist-poundings filled the air for half a minute, then the voices of the guards took complete charge. Above the clodding of feet of those Rag Birds making their get-away, the sharp orders of the guards barked out. "In there, you! You'll hang for this. And you, too, Wobbles. But *this* guy—he's the one that tried to stop them. Send him in for a talk. We can do some good with him."

"This guy," who was no other than

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Rustan, proved to be a tough customer. The chief of the guards was convinced that Rustan, if handled properly, could be played as a trump for law and order. A Rag Bird that tried to restrain his fellows from doing mischief was a rare bird indeed, and that was what Rustan had been caught in the act of doing.

"He's got the makings of a bodyguard," the chief of guards reported to the magistrates the next day. "Let me work on him."

"Be sure he doesn't work on you," they retorted, noting the chief's black eye. The fact was that Rustan had tried to fight his way out, believing he would be hanged with the others. The guards had subdued him with guns and pinned him down with questions. He had done his best to lie out of his heroic role.

Forced to admit that he had tried to dissuade his companions from throwing rocks, he had been unwilling to take any credit for it. "I hate the magistrates as much as any Rag Bird," Rustan had growled, "but I've got sense enough not to go around picking fights."

"We're going to give you a chance," the chief guard declared.

"I don't want it," Rustan retorted.

"We're ready to play fair with Rag Birds like you. We're going to give you a job."

RUSTAN grunted. He knew what these big shots were driving at. They were trying to stem the tide of more Rag Bird trouble by tossing out a few favors. He bristled with the snobbery of an aristocrat.

"No job for me," he growled. "I don't mind the dirt of living in the parks and orchards, but I don't want to get messed up with magistrates."

He was assigned to Hobart, who lacked a bodyguard. A guardsman's cap was stuck on his head, a preposterously large sword was belted around his ragged clothes, and he was pronounced ready for his first order.

Hobart gave him a scornful eye. "You can't stick around me looking that way. You've got to be hosed down and uniformed from head to toe."

Rustan shrugged; then Hobart told him to come on, they'd take care of the uniform later.

And so, less than twenty-four hours after the glass-crashing, less than ten hours after the latest Rag Bird hangings, Rustan found himself dragging along at the heels of the starchy, trim-mustached young magistrate, without the slightest idea where he was going.

They passed out of the capital building by way of an arched footbridge, high over the street—and then Rustan saw that they were entering the Temple of Visions.

"I'd better wait outside," said Rustan.

"Come along, Rags," Hobart barked. "With you for a contrast, my appearance should be perfect."

CHAPTER VI

A Shock for Venzita

VENZITA looked up at the two approaching figures as they entered the amber-lighted music room. Her hands released the golden harp, her slim fingers went to her lips stifling a little cry of surprise.

Her gaze lingered on the tall, ragged figure outrageously adorned with a huge sword and a guardsman's cap. With any other face that mixed costume would have been a comic cartoon. But Venzita's gaze grew intent, spellbound. She knew that face!

"Don't mind the caricature, Miss Venzita," said Hobart, marching up confidently. "I dragged him out of the

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junk wagon to make a bodyguard out of him . . . I'm speaking to you, Miss Venzita."

Venzita nodded slowly to Hobart, mumbled a low, "Your honor," and her eyes went back to meet Rustan's steady, impenetrable gaze. There was more than recognition in the Rag Bird's expression. There was challenge, accusation. Venzita's heart beat wildly.

Hobart's sharp voice intruded upon her shocked senses. "What's the matter, Miss Venzita?"

"N-nothing."

"If you're expecting me to apologize for the appearance of my bodyguard, forget it. I've come to deliver a court message . . . Will you do me the favor to quit looking at that rag heap? I've come to talk with you."

"I beg your pardon. Please be seated, your honor—and—sir." She put her harp aside and led the way across to the powder-blue upholstered divan. Rustan, however, remained standing. Venzita shot an anxious glance at him, then managed to turn her back toward him. "Your honor seems a trifle impatient," she said to Hobart.

"I'm one magistrate who isn't overconcerned by your whims, Miss Venzita," Hobart answered rather too politely.

"I'm quite aware of that," said Venzita, "and I'm a little surprised."

Hobart laughed lightly. "Rather disturbing, isn't it, to find that one magistrate out of sixteen can't be made into a puppet."

"You're all mixed up, Mr. Hobart, if you think I'm running a puppet show. My business is music."

"Music!" Hobart arched an eyebrow contemptuously.

"Most people appreciate music, Mr. Hobart, but a few—alas—don't have it in them. The ratio is about fifteen to one, I believe."

"I happen to have a practical turn of mind," said Hobart sullenly.

"That's why I'm surprised to see how you hate me," Venzita smiled politely, "considering that it was my suggestion to Mozambique that made you a magistrate. Would you care for a drink, your honor?" She rang for a waiter.

FORTIFIED with a few gulps from the goblet the waiter brought him, Hobart steeled himself to his task. "I've come to tell you—," he hestitated, perhaps disturbed by the motion of her hand as she brushed the careless waves of red hair that fell across her bare shoulder. She was beautifully dressed. That gown of sapphires only accentuated her loveliness.

"You started to say—"

"Oh, yes—about that Temple of Music—"

"Yes?" Her eyes were suddenly eager, like a child's when a gift is about to be unwrapped. Then her intent manner vanished, her lips lost their smile, her eyes anticipated disappointment. She quickly turned to Rustan, asked, "Does your master ever explain his grudge against me?"

The young magistrate countered with a turn of the subject. He shot a blunt question that put Venzita on her metal. "Why do you want to string all the magistrates? Why don't you choose one and marry him?"

"I—I wouldn't think of it!" she uttered breathlessly.

"There!" said Hobart vindictively. "You admit you're playing a game. You're letting them make love to you when you've no intention of—"

"They're *not* making love to me!"

"They're giving you gifts!"

"Yes—that is, Janetto—"

"They're proposing to you, aren't they?"

"Some of them have—"

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"How many?"

"Well, fourteen or fifteen. But I don't take it seriously. Most of them are already married, and I haven't the slightest affection for them—*that* way, I mean. They're friends, of course, but—"

"You're cheating them!" Hobart cried. He was on his feet now, pointing an accusing finger at her. "You're leading them on—"

"I'm not!" Venzita sprang up and started away.

"Wait!" Hobart snapped, following her. He caught her hand. "Young lady," a little of the harshness went out of his voice, "you needn't try to deny it. You're practicing the art of an enchantress. You're making it your business to weave a spell around every male that comes your way. You're exercising a magic power—"

"You lie!"

ANOTHER voice broke in—the low rich voice of Rustan. "I think he's right, Miss Venzita. At least that's the way the Rag Birds have got it figured."

"Rus—*sir!*" the girl gasped. She looked at him, transfixed. She was unaware that Hobart was still holding her hand, gripping it a little tighter as she tried to draw it away.

"The Rag Birds say you must be different from other women," Rustan pursued. "You'll never want to marry. You'll only want to make men your slaves."

"No! No! NO!" Glistening tears filled the girl's eyes. The words terrified her. "You don't understand!" she cried. "I want to love and be loved, the same as anyone else. But—"

"But what?" Hobart demanded

Her answer came in a low breathless whisper. "What chance have I had to be myself? All I've learned since Janetto undertook to train me has made me what I am. I've no desire to be an enchantress. But every song I sing, every word I say seems to make men fall at my feet."

"And you scorn them!" said Hobart.

"Janetto has drilled me in the arts of eluding them, teasing them with songs and laughter, and keeping out of their reach like a butterfly. It's all that I know to do."

At that moment a door far down the hall opened and Dr. Albert Janetto emerged. He was returning from a vision.

The three fell silent as he approached the arched entrance of the music room. He gazed in, said nothing. Venzita noticed that he was strangely pale. She wondered what vision had come to him.

"Will you join us, Albert?" she called to him. "Mr. Hobart and his bodyguard have come to bring us a message about the—" She stopped, her words choked down.

"About the Temple of Music," Dr. Janetto," said Hobart.

Janetto nodded weakly. He waited. "Well, what is the message?"

"What *is* the message, Mr. Hobart?" Venzita repeated timorously, her fingers light upon his hand.

Hobart's eyes passed over her lightly and turned to Janetto. "By my vote," he said tonelessly, "the appropriation has passed. The Temple of Music will be built—in honor of Venzita."

CHAPTER VII

A Visitor in the Night

FROM that night Dr. Albert Janetto's manner became a puzzle. With passing weeks his top-of-the-world spirit was eclipsed in a fog that grew blacker.

"Is Dr. Janetto ill?" the servants would ask Vanzita. "Is he afraid of something?"

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Venzita had no answer. The little old man in the wheelchair volunteered no information about his worries. She asked no questions.

In fact, she avoided talking with him, and when they dined with visiting magistrates their eyes did not meet.

The servants' gossip ran to weird terrorized whisperings. Nor was their talk all concerned with Dr. Janetto. The beautiful Venzita came in for her share of their remarks.

"Her music is growing flat." "Not flat—*low!*" "Low—flat—it's all the same. Anyhow the spirit's gone out of it." "She's quit practicing—spends all her time in her room."

In her room Venzita would ponder the question that she did not dare to confide in Janetto's visions. She was afraid of the answer.

Were Hobart and Rustan right? Was she an enchantress, playing a game, tossing men's hearts round like dice?

Over and over that conversation re-echoed in her ears. She avoided facing herself in the mirror. She would stray along the railing of the roof-garden, looking down listlessly upon the expanse of city.

Even those miserable outcasts clustered like vultures in the trees held her in scorn!

And the more respectable classes—the ones who paid taxes into the city's treasury—were beginning to talk, she knew. They were angry over that three million dollar appropriation. They were petitioning for a delay in the clearance of the site for the New Temple of Music.

How far would their protests go? How soon would their hatreds infect the magistrates themselves?

And what had the dashing young Hobart reported back to his fifteen fellow-magistrates? Probably he had knocked the props out from under every man of them who secretly hoped to marry her. He had only to quote her own words!

But Hobart would have added embellishments of his own. No doubt about that! She could almost hear him saying, "She's a cheat! She'll never have an ounce of love for any man. That damned little old wizard's tricks have crushed all of that out of her."

NIGHT came over the city. Venzita lingered out on the roof garden looking up at the deep blue summer sky. A servant came to remind her that supper would be served at her pleasure; the doctor had already eaten and returned to his visions. Venzita was not interested.

She lay in the hammock watching wisps of silver-edged clouds sift across the stars. She thought back to the summer when she had worked for two short weeks on a farm in the Blue Valley—side by side with Rustan.

She had been herself back in those days. No one could have made her believe she would ever be surrounded by all this fabulous world of wealth and finery. Why had it come to her? Could it be that she *was* an enchantress, gifted with a special sort of magic power to make men do her bidding?

"If so—*if this is true*—"

The turmoil of thought carried her deep into the night before she completed that sentence.

"If that's true, I might as well make the most of it!"

And suddenly her mind was filled with a wish, too terrible and ghastly to pass her lips. If she could make men do her bidding—yes—yes—yes!

A little *whirr* sounded from the air just beyond the roof garden. Venzita thought it must be a nighthawk coasting down out of the sky.

It came again—and stopped with a solid click. She ran to the railing, dis-

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covered that a loop of lithe rope had caught upon a steel post. The rope extended straight down into the night shadows of the temple wall. Someone had tossed that loop up from below.

Yes, there was a uniformed figure climbing up the rope. In a moment he was over the railing, standing tall and straight before her. He called her by name, a name she had almost forgotten, "Mary!"

"Rustan!" How fine and handsome he was in that guardsman's uniform, complete with scabbard and sword. She led him into a path of light, gazed at him. Every trace of the shaggy Rag Bird was gone. This was a new Rustan. Disturbingly new. Venzita would have given anything in the world to see a little of the old friendly gleam in his eyes.

"Mary," he whispered hoarsely. "I had to come. Don't think for a minute that you've charmed me here the way you do the magistrates. I'm made of different stuff, Mary. I've been a drifter, a rebel, a Rag Bird—and I'm too hard-boiled ever to be knocked off my pegs by any feminine wiles. But I had to come—to warn you!"

"What is it, Rustan?"

"If you've got a grain of honesty left in you, Mary, for God's sakes run away from this place."

Venzita gasped. "Run away—with a three million dollar honor about to be built for me?"

"How are you ever going to get out of this trap, Mary?"

THE girl did not answer until she had cast a cautious eye over the dimly lighted roof-porch. She spoke in a low voice. "Some day Janetto will die, Rustan." Her eyes held his in a tense grip. "When that happens, this tangled web I've walked into will dissolve."

"He'll die—" It was Rustan's eyes that held hers. "You're sure that—"

His sentence was lost in a moment of audible breathing. She felt his strong hands close tightly upon hers, felt the sharp scrutiny of his gaze.

He said, "Where is Janetto?"

"In the vision room."

"I'd like to see him."

"He's in no mood to receive visitors. Besides, he may stay with his visions until dawn."

"I'll wait," said Rustan. "I don't often get away from Hobart. And it was no cinch getting in here past your guards. I've got to make this trip count."

Venzita led him through the palace halls. A servant stopped them near the vision room door with a sharp bark. "He's not to be disturbed, Miss Venzita."

"We won't disturb him," the girl retorted. "Mr. Rustan will wait."

"This is very irregular, Miss Venzita," the servant protested. "The guards were not supposed to admit any guests. It's an hour past midnight."

"Time for you to be off duty," Venzita snapped.

The servant nodded. "My apologies, Miss—"

"See that Mr. Rustan is made comfortable while he waits," she ordered. "I'll return to the roof garden."

The servant bent over backwards to comply. He took Rustan's cap, coat, sword and scabbard to the hall-tree; he supplied Rustan with a cool drink, a newspaper, an electric fan. Then, hoping that everything was satisfactory, he retired.

Venzita returned to the roof garden alone. She preferred to leave Rustan to his own devices. Obviously he was bitter in his determination to keep himself outside the grasp of her power. But would he?

An hour passed. She glanced in, saw

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him sauntering along gazing idly at the paintings on the corridor walls. He drifted into the drawing room. She returned to the railing under the stars—listening, waiting.

At length the gray of dawn showed on the horizon. She heard Rustan's footsteps.

"I can't afford to wait any longer," he muttered. "In fact, I realize it's too late to talk with him."

Again that sharp exchange of glances, crystal clear in the hazy darkness, like the passing of secrets no words could fathom.

"Perhaps everything has been done that can be," Venzita breathed.

"I'm sure of it."

Rustan clutched her hand for an instant, then thrust himself away. He climbed over the edge of the railing, let himself down hand-over-hand by the rope.

Venzita's eyes followed him. In the dim light she saw the faint gleam of his scabbard—*saw that it was empty!*

"Your sword, Rustan!" she gasped. "Where—"

Then she caught her breath. He hadn't heard. But he must have known—

CHAPTER VIII

Murder

THE following forenoon a guardsman's sword was found jammed solidly through Dr. Albert Janetto's chest. The point of the blade showed sharp and bright through the back of the wheel-chair.

The little old figure looked more mystical than ever, his thick eyelids puffed out deathly white within the rims of black lashes, his little black beard stabbing out arrogantly from his chin.

The magistrates quickly gathered to view the scene of his death. They mumbled dry comments about the warmth of the room, the heaviness of the incense, the slightness of the blood pool in the lush carpet.

The news spread as fast as voices and radiotelephones could carry it. The verdict of the public was only half a jump of that of the courts.

"This proves you can't make the Rag Birds over into decent citizens," was the verdict of the public.

The official court verdict was simply, "Guilty of murder"—and it was reached before Rustan was found. Justice in the City of Beauty was famous for its speed.

The police found Rustan in his old rags, asleep in a tree. His guardsmen's uniform they discovered in one of the Rag Birds' treasure chests—a junk heap.

The hanging was set for the following Saturday at dawn.

The news grapevined to every Rag Bird grove for miles around. So they'd got Rustan! Rustan—that damned contrary arguñer who was always putting the kibosh on harmless little escapades of stealing and window-smashing. Yep, they'd got him. He'd gone to the capital building and let them stick him in a uniform. Then he'd stuck his neck out and they'd tossed a noose around it. And the grand yank was set for Saturday dawn.

A modest little delegation of twenty-five dirty ragged creatures huddled before Rustan's bars and carried on their visit under the hard eyes of the uniformed guards.

"You didn't do it!" the Rag Bird spokesman growled. "We know you too well."

Rustan shook his head. "No man knows what another will do under strange circumstances. I didn't know, myself, that I'd do it. But I claim that

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any man will kill if his purpose is strong enough."

THE Rag Birds waggled their eyebrows. The motive back of this murder, they knew, was something that the whole city was baffled about.

"Purpose, hell!" The spokesman stroked his stubbled brown chin. "You've got as much purpose as a runaway tornado. What's Janetto to you, dead or alive?"

"It's Venzita—Mary—"

Rustan's word's brought forth a low uproar of mutterings. That name Venzita was poison.

"But it's not the way you think," Rustan protested. "Hell, you couldn't understand unless you'd known her before, like I did. I'm telling you, before she fell into Janetto's clutches, she was—" He puffed a long breath through his lips and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling of his cell. "Well, I'm ready to give my life to see her free of the old chisler—that's the long and short of it."

The guards picked up their ears. So Venzita's wish was back of this killing! That slip would make headlines!

"You freed her, all right!" the spokesman grunted. "And what good is she to you, I'd like to know, when you're a dried-up apple on a hangman's tree?"

"So I'm not the lucky man!" Rustan snapped. "You don't have to rub it in. She's free just the same. Why don't you go and leave me alone?"

His anger and confusion socked them between the eyes. They blinked, rose awkwardly, trailed away in little groups, talking to themselves. The spokesman looked back and muttered, "I still say you didn't do it!"

The day's headlines set the city's nerves on edge. From the masses of workers and respectable citizens to the wealthiest and most respected barons, all felt the shock of Venzita's uncanny power as never before.

As if it weren't enough that she had made the magistrates a bunch of doddering fools; that she had cost the city a million for a Temple of Visions and was about to cost them three million more; that the very sight of her had driven sober men to drink, or madness, or senseless exploits of daring, or suicide—and their wives into fits of jealousy. Now her wiles were driving men to murder—and what good was a Temple of Visions after its chief mystic was murdered?*

Everyone talked. It was the Rag Birds who acted.

ON the Friday afternoon before the hangman's dawn, a massed army of dirty faces, ragged hair and clothes, naked arms and legs, marched toward the capital building. Thousands strong, it was an army of noise. With thundering voices, clashing pans and pipes and tin cans and all the other choice noise-makers from the choicest junk-heaps, it was a masterpiece in pandemonium.

The newspapers declared, afterward, that in noise-making alone this army set a new high for the New Dark Ages.

As the mass moved toward the hundred broad steps that led to the capital portico, their shouts and noise-beats and marching steps took on a grotesque rhythm.

Guards assembled on the portico,

*History and legend, are full of stories on enchantresses and sorceresses, all very lovely, who have cast their spell over men and enthralled them in a net of witchcraft. Sheba was one, and Cleopatra, and Circe. The oracle of Delphi was only a whisper in a well, but her attendants were lovely girls who were selected to keep the temple in order. It is to be suspected that there was nothing of magic in the power these women held over men, but simply their beauty, and the weird atmosphere they wove around themselves, that made men's minds reel to the unknown.—Ed.

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tightened their grips on machine guns. Terrorized magistrates gathered back of them, mumbling incoherent orders, waving their hands frantically.

The mob chant welled up to them. *"We want Rustan , . . We want Rustan. . . ."*

The guards would shoot the instant a foot struck the first step. Magistrates held their ears. The mob leaders waved their army on, the chant deepened, the last few yards before the steps narrowed—

Suddenly the shrill cry of a girl rang across the capital portico.

"Don't shoot them! Don't! Don't!"

Venzita raced across the portico, fought her way through dumfounded guards and fear-paralyzed magistrates, chased down the steps.

"Wait! Stop! I've got to talk to you!" Her hair fluttered loosely in the wind, the afternoon sun glinted across her waving arms, set fire to the thousand sapphires of her flowing gown. "You've got to hear me!"

Her words would have been futile, of course, but an attendant with a presence of mind that would win him a picture and a column in all the Sunday papers, raced after her dragging a microphone. Her words, ". . . hear me!" jumped through the loudspeakers all over the capital grounds.

The mob stopped.

There's something about a beautiful girl. If Mozambique or any of the other magistrates thought that only their artistic eyes or their advanced levels of human refinement were capable of a full appreciation of feminine beauty, here was a moment for them to remember.

The mob stopped and went silent.

And if any man from the proud and arrogant Hobart to the meanest Rag Bird believed that this enchantress, the one and only Venzita, always employed her beauty and her cunning for selfish ends—here was a moment to give them pause.

They paused, and every man of them was breathless as he listened to her words.

"You Rag Birds have come to protest the innocence of your friend Rustan." Her voice filled all outdoors; and for all its volume it was a voice of compassion. "You are right. Rustan is innocent. . . ." The distant buildings echoed back across the heads of the silent army. "You think I have used trickery to cast blame for this deed upon Rustan . . . You are right. I—I alone—am guilty."

She walked down the steps slowly, carrying the microphone with her. The mob began to fall back. She extended her hand in a gesture of invitation.

"I ask that the leaders of this crowd please come forward. I invite you to sit in conference with the magistrates, to make sure that justice is done."

CHAPTER IX

A Conviction; a Confession; a Proposal

A NEW trial was begun within an hour.

The magistrates squirmed, but they acceded to Venzita's plan: the Rag Bird leaders were given a voice.

In fact, every class in the City of Beauty had a representative on deck to confer with the assembled magistrates. After all, a three million dollar public project would rise or fall with the verdict.

After a two hour battle of pros and cons, the magistrates went into a private huddle to total up the scores.

If they hanged Rustan, they would have Rag Bird mob trouble on their hands, that was a cinch; and it might grow to serious proportions. But if they hanged Venzita, the Rag Birds would be pacified.

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So would the barons, the laborers, the middle class. A lot of their trouble would dissolve if Venzita's confession were accepted at face value. Family squabbles would vanish; confidence in the magistrates would improve, three million dollars would be saved.

And among the magistrates themselves, considerable jealousy and antagonism could be salved over if the law took its course. And if Hobart's earlier judgment was sound—if every one of them was being taken for a ride—if the girl had not the slightest intention ever of marching to the altar with any of them, in spite of all their gifts and soft words—

"In the interests of justice," Mozambique finally conceded, "we have no course but to accept her confession. She is guilty."

The magistrates nodded. From every viewpoint the verdict was sound. Venzita would hang at dawn.

But at that moment one lone dissenter rose to his feet and banged on the table. "In the interests of justice—hell!" Hobart exploded. "We proved my bodyguard guilty. He's still guilty. The evidence is still there, just like we found it. It hasn't changed one whit!"

"Tut-tut! We have a confession!"

"The confession's a lie. It was a lie to save us from that mob. That girl's as innocent as the day she was born—"

"Hold on, Hobart. You were the one who told us she was double crossing us—" They all shouted at once. "He's mad." "He's in love with her." "He fell harder than anyone." "She's still an enchantress—and a murderer!"

Hobart was mad. He proved it with his fists. He fought until they called the guards in self-defense. Not until he was dragged away, were they able to continue the business of the hour.

"The verdict, then, is guilty—by a fifteen to one decision."

MOZAMBIQUE cleared his throat. He foresaw that it would be a pleasanter matter to inform the girl that the decision was not quite unanimous. He would let her believe that *he,* at least, had held her to be innocent.

Rustan was released. Venzita was placed behind the bars.

The night came on. The dim lights of the prison corridor cast bars of black shadows across the cot where Venzita sat. She listened to the clocks strike the hours away toward midnight. Guards brought her food, but she refused it.

She buried her head in her arms. Images tortured her eyes—images of ugly Rag Birds coming toward her in a mass, shouting at her, blaming her for everything . . .

She looked up to see Mozambique standing outside her bars.

"I wanted to be with you in these last hours," his words made her smile bitterly. "You're too beautiful to die. You must know that I held you innocent to the last. If there was anything I could do . . ."

Venzita turned her head. She did not look up until she knew Mozambique was gone.

Other magistrates came from time to time, each trying in turn to salve his conscience by protesting that it was he who had cast the one vote for her innocence. She listened to none of them.

A little before dawn Hobart came. She gazed at him steadily through the bars, saw the bruises on his handsome face. So the guards were right, Hobart had fought to change the verdict—to save her!

"Let him in," she said to the guard.

The gate locked back of Hobart! the guard stood by, straining to catch the whispered words that passed between the young magistrate and the condemned girl.

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"You faked that confession," Hobart said tensely, "to stop the mob. All right, you saved the magistrates a lot of slaughter, but I'll be damned if we're going to let you pay with your life."

"The mob is still there," said Venzita. "If you hang Rustan you'll have a revolution on your hands."

"I'm going to get you out of here, Beautiful, if I have to knock down the guards and take you by force. We'll run away. We'll be married—"

"You're talking wild."

"I *am* wild—I've been wild for you from the minute I saw you . . . You love me, Venzita!"

The girl answered in slow soft-spoken words. "You're wrong there, Hobart. The one person I love—the one I've loved all my life—the one I'll keep on loving till my last hour is up—is Rustan."

A flame of red shot through Hobart's face, then his cheeks and the knuckles of his hands went cold white. "So that was why you confessed! To save that murdering Rag Bird!" Hobart breathed hard through his clamped teeth. He whirled toward the barred door, flinging a cutting farewell back at her. "All right. You can take your medicine."

"Your love for me melts rather quickly—"

"Love! That word is blasphemy on your lips! You're a damned enchantress, playing your game! You'll never have a sincere emotion as long as you live!"

VENZITA threw herself in his path before the guard could open the way for him. "If that's what I am to you—". the potent challenge of her voice broke off. The hint of enraged decision in her eyes, the momentary flash of something sinister upon her lips, softened. Her eyelids lowered plaintively, she murmured a half-audible, "Hobart!"

Her hand reached out to him, her slim fingers caught his coat sleeve ever so lightly. "It's goodby now, Hobart." She gave a little swallow. "I'm seeing you for the last time."

The anger in Hobart's eyes fixed in a sullen glazed expression. He saw that she wanted to talk. He took a slow, deep breath. She led him back to the farther corner of the cell.

"Hobart, before my time is up, there's one favor you can do for me." She looked at him appealingly. The magnetism of her eyes sent a tremor through him. He started to turn, she clung to his hand. Then her fingers rested on his shoulder.

"Is—is it something within reason?" he asked quietly.

Smiling faintly, she shook her head. "It's utterly irrational, Hobart. But a girl who is about to die deserves one favor, doesn't she? Even if it is unreasonable?" Her tantalizing charm held him. "I'm asking you, Hobart. . . . Will you grant my wish?"

DAWN came. Blood-red skies in the east announced that the hour for the hanging was at hand.

Rag Birds climbed down out of their trees, plain citizens by the thousands filtered through the park groves to the open parade grounds beyond. Barons drove up in their silver-nosed cars. All gathered in around the circular fence, surging with the same curiosity that had taken them to Janetto's funeral a few days before.

They stared open-mouthed. For many, who had followed the enchantress' fabulous career through the newspapers, this was to be the first—and last—actual glimpse of her.

Not a very satisfactory glimpse; the fence held them too far back.

The prison wagon made its way through the vast circle of spectators to

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the center of the open arena. The white-garbed figure was conducted to the hangman's tree.

In a few minutes it was all over. Gradually the crowd broke up, though many groups lingered, some pointing to the dead dangling figure, trying to convince themselves that they could discern something of the girl's characteristic languor in her last pose as she hung there.

Though of course they couldn't, even with the aid of glasses. The white-sheeted covering was too complete. Besides, as the hangman and the inner circle of guards knew, the figure wasn't Venzita.

VENZITA and the tall well-dressed young man who sat beside her at the wheel of the private sound-proof cab gave a farewell wave to the police escort that had accompanied them ten miles beyond the city's walls. The cab, inscribed with the words, "Magistrate Number 16," sped on toward the distant mountains.

"Where am I taking you?" the young man asked. "To Blue Valley?"

"*You* may go there if you wish," Venzita answered languidly. "As for me—drop me off any time you like."

Rustan smiled at her but she refused to look at him. He cut his speed, tried to put his arm around her. She shrank out of his grasp. He drew the car to a stop, turned to face her.

"See here, Mary, I let you go out of my life once. I'll never be fool enough to make that mistake again . . . What's the matter, Mary?"

That elusive hint of terror in her face was there again, as it had been the moment she had picked him up. "Please, Rustan, don't fall in love with me—"

"That's something you can't stop," Rustan laughed. "All your uncanny power to make men do your bidding couldn't hold me at bay. We're going to be married—"

The girl shook her head violently. "Do you think I could ever respect you after what you did?"

Rustan narrowed his eyes. "You mean—"

"That you became my slave the same as every other man." She looked into the distance hazily. Her words came painfully, breathlessly, like a secret confession that had to be made. "Now I could no more love you than I could love Hobart. That poor sap—he knew me for what I was—an enchantress playing my evil power—so—"

"Yes?"

"I made him pay. I caught him in the trap of my will—I forced him to write a confession that *he* had murdered Janetto, and I let him hang for it."

Rustan raised an eyebrow, nodded half-comically. "Good going!"

"But, Rustan," the girl choked, "can you realize how terrifying it is to me to know that I have such power? To know that you—or any man that I might fall for—will turn puppet at my slightest glance—"

"I'll see that you get over that notion, as far as I'm concerned, Mary."

"I know what you think, Rustan. You and Hobart and I had the same flash that night the three of us met. We thought that my life could be restored if Janetto were out of the way. All three of us conceived a murder in that moment. But it was a futile deed, Rustan. All my life I'll despise you for doing it, because you did it in obedience to my evil will."

"And you were going to hang for it—"

"Because in the deepest sense I was guilty."

"If I hadn't done it," said Rustan, smiling casually, "would you have dared to?"

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VENZITA shrank involuntarily at the thought—answer enough for Rustan. He laughed. She would never have committed a murder.

"You're no more guilty than I am," he said. "And you're not half as much an enchantress as you think . . . No, you're not! You didn't make me do murder, and you didn't extort a fake statement from Hobart."

The girl went slightly pale and her eyelids fluttered. "I'm a little dizzy. Did you say—"

"You'd better have some air," Rustan laughed, throttling the cab along. "After you had me released, our friend Hobart saw his pack of cards shattering. He had counted on my being hanged—and quickly—for he knew I had the goods on him. I'll admit you sold the hanging to him in short order; but with me free and in cahoots with the capital's bodyguards, he knew it was coming. His quick decision saved him from facing a public scandal."

"Eloise is a nice girl, but she has absolutely no sex appeal."

"You mean—Hobart *was* guilty?"

"As guilty as a worm in an apple. He must have followed me up the rope to your roof garden that night, intent on using my sword. On my way down, hand over hand, I made the discovery that someone had gone down ahead of me—with blood-stained hands. Another bodyguard and I caught Hobart washing his bloody hands—and that's when I hit for the trees to keep from getting shot—or poisoned, like Van Hise."

"Van Hise!" Venzita gasped. "That was another murder he wrote into his confession—and I thought he did it for a joke!"

"For an enchantress, you're darned innocent," Rustan laughed.

Venzita laughed at herself as the car rolled along, her thoughts drifting back over the strange events. Suddenly she gave a little shriek.

"Rustan, you would have been hanged!"

"If it hadn't been for you—yes. I thought you were in love with Hobart. My hanging would have left him in the clear."

Venzita gave a horrified gasp; then another little shriek of terror. "Rustan, *I* would have been hanged—if—if Hobart hadn't come—"

"Not on your life, Mary. Those capital guards have their own grapevine that reaches all the way to the hangman, and every man of them was on my side. Where are we going, Mary?"

The mountains were looming purple and blue on the distant horizon. The girl edged closer to Rustan, put her hand in the crook of his elbow. Her red hair fluttered against his shoulder.

She spoke a bit timidly, for one with such a reputation for enchantment. "Would you care for a honeymoon in Blue Valley?"

Rustan grinned. "The season's right for making hay."

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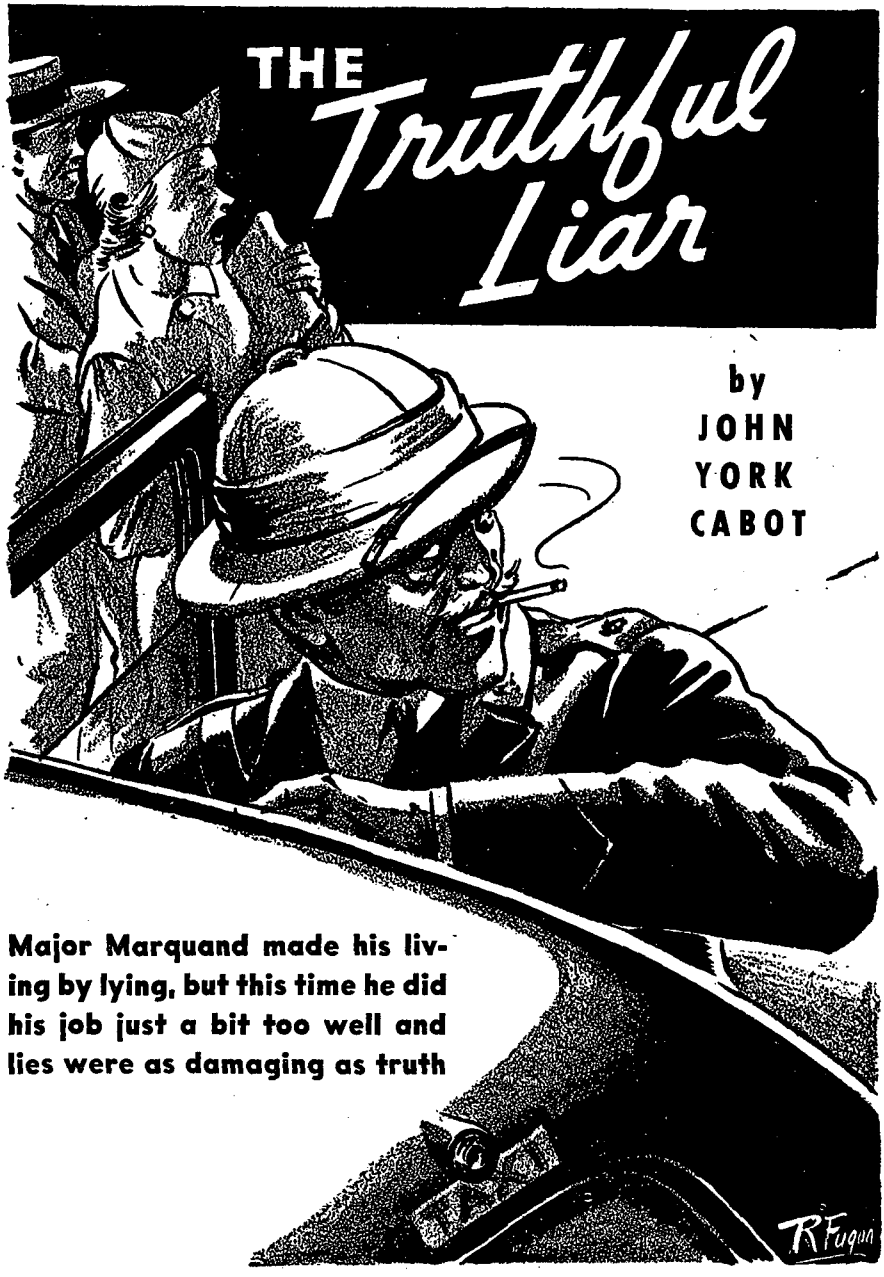
THE Truthful Liar

by JOHN YORK CABOT



Major Marquand made his living by lying, but this time he did his job just a bit too well and lies were as damaging as truth

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"THEN you will not reconsider, Major Marquand?" the little oriental pleaded. "You will have no change of heart?"

The tall, moustached man smiled contemptuously.

"I have told you, Ying, that you are a fool. The money is gone, and that's all there is to it. Unfortunate, but final." He turned away, as if to leave. The little oriental reached forth and put a detaining hand on his arm.

"That money," Ying said softly, "was for war relief of my people. It meant food and clothing and bandages and medicines for the poor and the weak and helpless."

"You should have thought of that," Major Marquand declared with bland unconcern, "before you risked it. After all, your people trusted you to handle the funds."

"But you told me that I was not risking it. You told me that it was a foolproof investment which would bring returns for my people's money!" Ying was fighting hard to keep his voice level.

"There is no such thing as a foolproof investment," Major Marquand smiled. "You know this by now. What happened was unfortunate. But I can do nothing about it. Now, if you please, I'll say goodbye. Perhaps we'll meet again and laugh over this misfortune." Once more Major Marquand turned to leave, and once more Ying seized his arm.

"In the legends of my people, Major Marquand, there is a very ancient incantation. It has been used only against those of your stripe." Ying half closed his eyes, and recited, almost inaudibly, *"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you; and through the hours*

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of this day, may the demons of hell follow the untruths from your foul tongue!"

Major Marquand smiled mockingly.

"Very pretty," he applauded. "Now, Ying, get off the steps of this hotel. And if you bother me with so much as a visit again, I'll have you thrown out. Good day!"

Major Marquand was at the door of the hotel, just stepping toward his cab, when the pistol shot rang out. By the time he had wheeled, to stare down the sidewalk, a tiny knot of horrified pedestrians had gathered around the body of Ying. The little oriental had put a bullet through his brain.

IN the cocktail bar of the Hotel Carlo, late that afternoon, Major Milo Marquand, tanned, virile, and immaculately tailored in a fresh suit of whites, sat in pleasant contemplation sipping a brandy.

The affair of the suicide was now almost forgotten. At least it was buried among the unpleasant trifles of the day. The management of the hotel had been very swift and efficient in ridding Major Marquand of the bother of a police report investigation. They realized that a guest as important as the Major would think kindly toward them for it.

The major smiled at his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, fully realizing what a militarily handsome figure he presented. His appearance was his greatest stock in trade. That slight scar at his jaw, for example, could pass with quiet modesty as the souvenir he had obtained in the Arabian fighting. This, in spite of the fact that the scar had been obtained on the sharp edge of a beer bottle in a fight in Hell's Kitchen while a youth.

And the slight Roman ridge in his nose—patrician though it looked—was a reminder of an unpleasant three years spent in the state reformatory. He'd gotten it stealing from a cellmate.

But that and other murky outlines of his past were all behind him now. For Major Milo Marquand—christened by his drunken mother as Nicki Moretti—was a very wealthy man. In fact this stay at the expensive Hotel Carlo was in celebration of his recent attainment of seventy-five thousand dollars.

The seventy-five grand should see him through at least three years of good living. Three years in which he could do a lot of traveling, and let his scent cool off quite a bit. Not that the cops were hot after him, he told himself again, but in the "con" game a person is wise to lay low after a big killing.

And the war relief funds swindled from the guileless Ying had been a plenty big killing—and safe. The major had counted on Ying's shame to keep the little oriental's mouth shut. And the suicide, rather than face his people, was more than the major had dared hope for. Now everything was right. The major ordered another drink in honor of Ying.

It would be good to take a rest, the major thought happily. But he couldn't resist stooping to flip the bartender for double-or-nothing on the drink. Just a sporting gesture from a grand gentleman to a servant. And when the grand gentleman, Major Marquand, had won, he put his two-headed half dollar back in his pocket and smiled benignly on the servant bartender.

The bar had been deserted save for the major and the tender, but now a short, pudgy, leather skinned man of middle age entered and took a stool beside Marquand. Instantly and instinctively—from long practice—the major sized up the newcomer.

THE man was wearing expensive clothes that were, nevertheless,

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baggy and ill-fitting. The hide color of his skin marked him as being from the west or southwestern States.

"Cow money," the major thought. "Or oil." He smiled engagingly at the pudgy little man, also a habit of long practice.

"Have a drink with me, sir," the major said, putting on his best, slightly British accent.

The newcomer looked up, startled and pleased.

"Well, that's right nice of you, stranger," he said. His drawl scored the major's first guess as to origin a hundred per cent. "Don't mind if I do."

The bartender took the newcomer's order, straight rye (and went off to get the bottle, smiling fondly at the major's democratic ways.

"You look like a Texan," the major declared after a moment.

The newcomer grinned.

"Not so far off, at that. I hail from Oklahoma. My name's Scragg. What's yours?" He held out a hand that wasn't pudgy, but was brown and hard.

The major gave him a firm military grip and his name.

"Well, now," said Scragg. "A fighting man, eh?"

The major smiled modestly.

"Hardly, old chap. That is, not any more. I saw a bit of service back awhile." Then, easily, "Are you traveling on business, or just on vacation?"

"Well," Scragg seemed to appriase the major for an instant as if debating whether or not he should immediately take him into close confidence. The major smiled, melting Scragg's conversational ice jam. "Well," he went on, "a little bit of both. You see Ma and I—always call the Missus Ma—Ma and I have got to go down to Saint Looie to clear out the rest of her father's estate. Sell property and all like that. Her pop passed away about six months back. Left her quite a bit he'd made on okie oil speculations in the past five years."

Something inside Major Marquand reacted like a fire gong on an engine horse. In spite of his resolve to keep strictly away from business, he found himself mentally scratching his itchy palms.

"Oil speculations are deucedly interesting," Major Marquand fished. "Had a bit of a go with oil speculations in Iraq, some years back. Just dabbled, y'know."

"Did you now?" Scragg was pleased at finding a common bond with this obviously high-toned stranger. "Then you'll be interested in hearing about our wells, the ones the Missus' pop left to her."

"Right now," said Major Marquand, "I hold nothing but South African mining interests, but you've no idea how much your oil talk will interest me."

"Mines, eh?" said Scragg, duely impressed. "Bartender, get this here major gentleman what he wants to drink." And then, volubly, and in great detail, Mr. Scragg sailed into a complete accounting of his oil wells. And as Scragg talked on, Major Marquand bought drink after drink, for some of which he flipped his two-headed half dollar with the bartender.

AT the end of an hour, Scragg had exhausted his oil information. And at the end of that time, Major Marquand was exultantly certain that this fish had at least two-hundred-thousand dollars of ready cash waiting to find a smarter pocket. The temptation was terrible. Something in the back of his brain kept hinting to the major that this was too good to pass up, and that luck runs in cycles, and that he was swinging into the peak of his cycle. At length,

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Major Marquand gave way to temptation. He began to talk about his South African mining holdings.

"Diamonds," said Scragg, properly awed. "There must be a fortune in diamonds!"

Major Marquand smiled deprecatingly.

"Not so much as you'd think there was," he said. "Why, I've one mine on which the yearly yield is only a hundred thousand."

Major Marquand picked this time as appropriate for tipping the bartender a fiver with the round of drinks he brought up. Any doubts that Scragg might have held as to the actual worth of the mine promptly vanished.

"How many mines do you have?" Scragg asked almost breathlessly.

"There now," the major laughed at himself, "I've started trying to pass myself off as a chap of great wealth. To be utterly frank, old boy, it's not as big as it sounds. You see, I've only three mines. Each is in the same territory."

Scragg took a deep breath, opened his mouth, swallowed the hook, and was on. From that moment, Major Marquand felt certain he had him. They left the bar two hours later, parting in front of the main desk of the hotel.

"And I want you and your wife to be my guests at dinner this evening," the major reminded Scragg.

Scragg was starry-eyed.

"I don't know how I'll ever repay you, Major," he declared a bit thickly. "Your a white man, certain. That transaction is all in my favor. I feel as if me and Ma was cheating you blind."

The major waved his hand.

"Don't be silly. I've a hunch I can make oil pay me something. It'll be fun trying, at the least." Then he turned to the desk clerk.

"I'll be expecting a cable for the Maharajah of Ejkar in the next hour or so. Will you see that it's sent up to my room promptly, boy?"

Scragg looked at the major as if he might swoon with excitement.

"One of them Indian Prince fellows?" he asked.

"An old friend," the major nodded. "We play chess by cable. He might not have figured out his move yet, but I expect to hear from him soon."

Scragg extended his hand.

"Until dinner, Major," he said.

"Until dinner, Mr. Scragg."

"Call me George," Mr. Scragg begged.

The major smiled fondly.

"I've not many friends, George. But I've certainly taken a liking to you, old chap." It was like patting a puppy on the head. Scragg walked off in a daze of pride. The major watched him go. Then he turned to the desk clerk. "I'm also expecting a carton of Fielding-Nought cigarettes from New York. My special brand. If they arrive, send them up."

Fielding-Noughts were a dollar the package. Major Marquand strolled to the elevators happy in the knowledge that everything was running smoothly. Two-hundred-seventy-five grand would be so much nicer than a mere seventy-five. Already the major was a little bit disgusted with himself for having been so easily satisfied.

IN his luxurious suite of rooms, the major opened his luggage and rummaged back and forth until he finally located the papers he wanted: his South African mining deeds. He looked at them fondly as he put them atop his bureau. He'd never imagined he'd use these again. They'd been good in nailing lots of small fry in the old days. And the major's judgment of George Scragg placed the Oklahoman as being

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distinctively small fry, but with big-time cash reserves.

The major smiled, recalling the latter part of the conversation at the bar. Two-hundred-thousand cash, in exchange for a stinking old hole in the earth that hadn't produced a Woolworth imitation in the last eighty years. It was a slick job, even though he wouldn't have had to have been so slick with such an easy snipe as Scragg. But, being a professional, the major took pride in doing his work well.

"Tonight I'll get the check. Cash it tomorrow; gone the following day. And Scragg will wake up two weeks later." The major mused pleasantly to himself. There were plenty of far-off places to be reached by plane in that time.

There was a knocking on his door. The major looked up.

"Come in, old chap," he shouted.

A bellhop entered.

"Cablegram," he said.

For an instant Major Marquand permitted a frown to slip across his brows. Then it was gone and he took the envelope with careless unconcern, tossing a half-dollar on the tray. The boy left.

Feverishly, then, Major Marquand tore open the cable. This was a gag of some sort. Who in the hell would be sending him a cable? He didn't know a soul who lived outside of the Uni— Major Marquand cursed in explosive bewilderment.

The cable contained chess symbols.

And it was signed: "Maharajah of Ejkar!"

The major's hand trembled ever so lightly. If this were a gag, and it *had* to be a gag since, as far as he knew, there wasn't any such person as the Maharajah of Ejkar, it was definitely screwy.

Then the major's jaws hardened. It was a gag, of course. Why, it was all it could be. Doubtless there was another "con" here at the Hotel Carlo who must have recognized him in the lobby. All right. It was funny and he'd let it go. Just so long as that other "con," whoever he was, kept his mitts off Scragg.

It was hard for the major to drive away the unnerving effects of the fake cable as he crumpled it up and tossed it in the waste basket. And it was harder still for him to sleep as he stretched out on his bed for a short nap.

Especially when another bellhop appeared less than a half hour later— bearing a long, oblong, sealed carton, postmarked, "New York."

The major was so nettled this time that he forgot to tip the bellhop, and sent him away with an uncivil grunt. For on the top of the package there was the label, "Fielding-Nought."

This was unnerving because of the fact that Major Marquand had never placed such an order with those cigarette manufacturers. And he was additionally bewildered when, on opening the package at the top of those in the carton, he saw that the long, fine tobaccoed cigarettes bore in gold lettering the name: "Major Milo Marquand!"

The major threw the carton angrily on the sofa.

"This is going a little far, whover that wise guy happens to be."

And it occurred to him then that it might be a wise idea to look up his heckler and offer to make a deal, cutting him in on the Scragg loot, if he'd be nice and mind his own business. But Milo Marquand, alias Nicki Moretti, had worked too long alone to be willing to compromise now. Especially in view of the fact that the Scragg job would be the plum of his career.

"He can go to hell," the major muttered, "whover he is!"

MRS. GEORGE SCRAGG was a mountain of a woman, with gray

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hair and thick bristle-gray eyebrows. Her skin was the same leathery tan as her husband's, and she seemed to be about the same age as her spouse. Much to the major's joy, she seemed even more tremendously impressed than her husband had been.

"And you'll meet the duke, of course, the first chance you have to visit your newly acquired mines," the major said affably.

Mrs. Scragg beamed wrinkles of sheer heavenly joy.

"I've never met real royalty before," she said excitedly. Then to her spouse: "I think it's so fine of the major, don't you, George?"

And so it went for the rest of the dinner. The Scraggs were as putty in the major's deft hands. It was childishly simple. So childishly simple that it drove away the nettling irritation he had felt over the cable and cigarette hoaxes. When at last he brought the Scraggs up to his suite to "complete the transaction and cement our friendship," the major was glowing with triumphant good cheer.

He even made a point of offering George Scragg one of the personally inscribed Fielding-Nought cigarettes, and of fishing out of the waste basket and showing him, as a casual item of interest, the cable from the Maharajah.

It was ten o'clock when, with the certified check for two-hundred-thousand from George Scragg in his pocket, the major bid the couple goodnight at his door.

"It has been charming," he smiled. Laughingly, he added: "You can stop that check the first thing in the morning, George, if the certified mine reports I show you aren't what I said they were."

Both Scraggs got a laugh out of this. The picture of a gentleman such as the major being a sharper was quite hilarious. They said their goodnights on a festive note.

The major bolted the door, once they'd gone, and drew forth the certified check with hands that trembled visibly. He felt like shouting wildly, or crying, or screaming. His elation was overpowering. And in the morning he'd have the fraudulent mine reports to turn over to George Scragg. He'd telephoned long-distance to Chicago and spoke cautiously to a trusted middle-broker who had assured him that he would make a nice set of reports which would arrive special delivery.

Major Milo Marquand sat himself down to a tumbler of whisky and a bottle of soda.

HE was just a bit woozy when the knock came on his door. It was repeated before he heard it. He crossed the room, after hiding the check under the desk blotter, and cautiously opened the door. It was a uniformed messenger who stood there.

"Major Marquand?" asked the uniformed boy. "A message from Chicago, special delivery."

The major smiled, signing for the envelope. His middle-broker had worked exceptionally fast. The reports were already here. He could show them to the Scraggs this very evening if he wished.

The boy left and the major returned to his desk. Minutes later he was poring somewhat foggily over the reports on the worthless South African dirt holes. And seconds after that he was jolted into sobriety by what he read.

"Mining holdings are valuable as hell," the report read. *Don't do a thing with them until you hear further from me. Came across the amazing news while looking up the correct forms in the consulate offices. This is on the level! Sit tight! Looks as if better*

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than half a million is involved. Will demand my cut on this, if reports I found are true. Don't peddle the damned papers: I'm not kidding."

It was signed: *"Schwartz."* Schwartz was the middle-broker in Chicago to whom the major had called. But at this minute he wasn't thinking of Schwartz. Instead, the major was thinking sickly of one paramount fact.

The Scraggs were in possession of the mining deeds. The transaction was completed. He, greedy ass that he'd been, had sold out half a million in mining property for a paltry pittance. Major Milo Marquand was driving himself slightly insane with this anguished realization.

And it was at this moment, while the major sat there, staring stupidly down at the floor, that his eye happened to hit and hold upon a picture in a newspaper that had been dropped there.

The picture was that of a sober young oriental. The caption above it read, "War Relief Head Is Suicide."

Irritated, the major kicked the paper with his foot so that the picture was no longer visible. Perhaps it was his agitation over the imminent loss of a quarter of a million dollars. Or perhaps it was a faint, thin voice of conscience crying in the back of his mind. Suddenly, at any rate, the major could hear Ying's voice from that early afternoon.

"And through the hours of this day, may the demons of hell follow the untruths from your foul tongue."

Inexplicibly, a cold sweat broke out on the major's forehead. It was as if Ying's voice was audibly in the room with him, mocking him. He stood up.

"To hell with this," he muttered. "I'm not out those papers yet. They were saps enough to take 'em, and they'll be saps enough to give 'em back."

And then, in spite of himself, he heard Ying's voice in the back of his mind, speaking as it had that afternoon.

"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you this day."

Truth and lies. Well this was one lie that turned to truth. He'd profi—Suddenly the major was stopped short by the glimmering of a wild, foolish idotic idea. But then his face twisted in cynical disdain.

"I can't let this momentary mess get me down," he muttered. "I've got work to do, and I'll have to do it fast."

GEORGE SCRAGG was in his dressing robe when the major pounded on the door of their suite. He was sleepy-eyed, and obviously startled at seeing the major.

"I must talk to you, old chap," the major greeted him. He had no trouble in making his voice sound agitated. Mr. Scragg nodded bewilderedly, pulling his robe about his paunch and directing his visitor to a chair.

The major shook his head.

"No, old boy, I prefer to stand if you don't mind." Nervously he lighted a cigarette.

George Scragg sat down perplexedly and waited for the major to explain his visit. The major gave an excellent imitation of honest-man-struggling-with-a guilty-conscience. He paced back and forth, puffing nervously on his cigarette.

"I can't do it, old fellow. I just can't," the major declared in mental anguish when he considered the silence tense enough.

George Scragg blinked his eyes.

"Do what?"

"Let you take those mining deeds," the major made himself blurt the words, like a man desperate and ashamed all at once.

"But the deal—" George Scragg began bewilderedly.

"The deal was a dirty, rotten, crooked

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mess!" The major managed to put tears into his voice now.

"Dirty? Rotten? Crook—" George Scragg faltered in confusion.

"Yes, I was going to make you and your wife the victims of the first wretched, stinking trick I've ever pulled in all my life!" The major sat down suddenly, burying his head in his hands. "You mean," said George Scragg, shocked, "those deeds are no good?"

"They are utterly worthless. The property they lease has been diamond-dead for over ten years," the major said chokingly.

"But my money," George Scragg was instantly on his feet, indignant. "What did you do with that check?"

"I've brought it with me, you can have it back!" The major rose and handed the check to Scragg. "Now give me those deeds, man, and let me leave before this damnable shame kills me."

But George Scragg, though slow about many things, was not quite so slow once he was forewarned that he was dealing with a man who had sharped him once.

"If those papers are worthless," he said suspiciously, "why do you want them back. I can just tear them up."

The major felt suddenly uncomfortable. He had underestimated George Scragg a little too heavily. But he had to stick to his role.

"My conscience wouldn't let me do it, wouldn't permit me to go through with the swindle," he said despairingly, switching to the groundwork of his approach. "You people were too decent. I tell you, I swear by the living gods that this is the first dishonest thought I'd ever entertained in my life!" The major was no slouch as a ham. His performance was more than slightly convincing to Scragg.

"Ma will be sorry to hear this," George Scragg said.

"I'VE been more or less out of my head for the past month, old boy," the major said emotionally, plunging onward. "I've not been well. In fact, well, the doctor's given me no time at all left in life. I'm liable to go any instant; my heart."

This struck deep in George Scragg.

"Why, gosh, yes," he agreed, "that would be enough to make anybody a little crazy now and then. I know it would me. Say, I'm terribly sorry," he concluded lamely.

If Major Marquand felt that he was digging deep into the tears and gush, the look on his audience's face was enough to convince him that it had been worth while.

"So I was really a little bit out of my head, old man, when I pulled that dirty trick on you two. The minute I regained the slightest normalcy, I regretted it."

"I think I understand, Major," George Scragg said sympathetically. "I had an aunt once who used to go temporarily off the handle when she had a severe mental strain. Don't worry, I'll say nothing of this to the Missus."

Major Marquand took Scragg's hand.

"Thanks, George old boy. You don't know what this has meant in torment and suffering for me. Have you got those worthless deeds?"

This time George Scragg handed across the papers without further urging. The major felt like yelling in triumphant glee as his fists closed about the deeds.

At the door George Scragg said:

"I'm grateful to you, Major, for your honesty. And you don't have to worry none about me telling a soul about your spells. And if you'd like, the Missus and I'll keep you company any time that you feel you might be dy—that is, feel as if dea—I mean—" Scragg floundered around in confusion.

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The major gripped his hand.

"I know what you mean, old boy. I appreciate it." He made his voice husky, and tried his best to look like a man who'd die at the drop of a pin. Then the major stepped down the hall and Scragg closed his door softly in the background.

Had Scragg seen Major Milo Marquand's face—wreathed in an exultantly avaricious grin—he would have scratched his thick head and wondered even further about his strange experiences with the cultured British ex-army officer.

BACK in his suite, Major Marquand closed and locked the door hurriedly, going immediately to his desk where he sat down and carefully examined the South African mining deeds. They were just the same as when he'd turned them over to the guileless Scraggs.

And now the major picked up the recently arrived special delivery message from his confidante Schwartz. It was a pleasure for him to sit down once more and go over it. He removed the note from the evelope.

"Mine holding report forgeries to arrive tomorrow. There will be the usual charge for services. Twenty-five bucks per deed. Good luck and good hunting.—Schwartz."

Major Marquand stared popeyed at the page. This was not the note Schwartz had originally written. It was totally different, quite completely in reverse to what he had stated then. Why, this note read as if the mines weren't worth a damn at all!

Quickly, the major began to riffle through his other papers. Six, seven times, he returned to the envelope, searching through its folds to find the original message from Schwartz. But there was no other message. Only this.

Marquand felt as if he were going mad.

A telephone call to Chicago got him Schwartz. Frantically, the major demanded to know about the mine, about the note.

"Are you crazy, Major?" Schwartz demanded. "There was only one note. That told you that the fees would be the same."

Marquand tried, almost screamingly, to explain to Schwartz what he meant. But the go-between finally cut him off.

"Go to bed and sleep through it. I've never known you to drink on the job before." Schwartz hung up on him.

And now, maddeningly, Ying's voice came back to Major Milo Marquand. And with it the incredibly insane suspicion he'd had momentarily a half-hour or so ago.

"May the Gods of Truth," he could hear Ying say, "control your lies against you this day."

And suddenly, for no reason that he was conscious of, the memory of the cable from the non-existent Maharajah returned to Major Marquand. And with it came the recollection of the cigarettes, inscribed for him, and which he hadn't ever ordered.

MAJOR MILO MARQUAND squeezed his hands so tightly that the nails bit into his flesh. His mind was an agony of torment.

"Damn!" Marquand said explosively, standing up from his desk. "It's ridiculous. It's preposterous. I refuse to believe it. That oriental hodge-podge!"

But there were the cable from the Indian potentate, the ultra-expensive cigarettes, and the first message from Schwartz. They all had one thing in common. They all followed a particular lie of Major Marquand.

The cablegram had made his lie about

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the Indian Maharajah a fact.

The cigarettes had turned his play for swank to cold truth.

Schwartz's first note had made true the lies about the mining holdings which he'd told to the Scraggs.

And now, as a sort of utterly staggering clincher, Major Milo Marquand realized one last fact. He had—knowing the mines to be valuable—rushed to Scragg and lied about their value, calling them worthless. Significantly, when he returned to his room, the mining deeds *were* worthless. His last lie had been made true!

Marquand threw his hands over his face, as if in an effort to shut out these conclusions, to drive away their maddening implications. But the pieces fitted far too well to be ignored. Ying had cursed him. Ying had cursed him so that the lies he told this day would be truths.

"May the Gods of Truth control your lies against you this day." The words came to Marquand again, in Ying's voice. But even as he fought them from his brain, he realized something else. The curse ended with: "this day."

Frantically, Marquand recalled the part in the rest of the curse. The part that said: "through the hours of this day." Now he was utterly convinced. The curse was for this day, for twenty-four hours. This day was not yet over. Marquand glanced swiftly at the clock on his desk. No, by God, this day wasn't through yet. It was but a quarter to midnight.

"There are fifteen minutes left to this day," Marquand said savagely to himself. "And in those fifteen minutes, Ying, I'll make a sucker of you and your oriental curse!"

"Lies," he went on. "My lies become truths, eh? Well what's to prevent me from getting down to the lobby and lying my damned head off. I can make those mines worth millions in fifteen minutes. All I need is someone to lie to." He was laughing now, shakily and a little wildly.

Major Milo Marquand's voice had been choked, and now he was breathing heavily through his nostrils, chest heaving. He started swiftly for the door of his suite. Started swiftly and stopped with sickening abruptness. A sudden, horrible wrenching tore his chest, his face going ghastly pale.

The major had his hand on his heart, slumping slightly forward, seeking the refuge of a chair. He felt an incredibly engulfing wave of weakness as he sank into the chair. He wanted to curse his luck as his eyes found the clock. But there was not enough strength left. He dared not move. The weakness was overpowering, the ache in his chest unbearable.

And as the major sat there helpless, in agony, his eyes fixed staringly on the clock that mocked him, he knew that Ying had gathered in all the aces. The major would never get downstairs before the day was over. The major would probably never get downstairs again.

Hideously, now, his own words were swimming before his pain-blurred eyes. The words that had been so glibly called upon to eucre Scragg out of the deeds.

"The doctor's given me no time at all left in life. I'm liable to go any instant; my heart."

Major Milo Marquand knew, as the weakness grew more and more engulfing, that Ying's curse had made that last lie of his, that final rotten falsehood, an inescapable fact. With his last remaining strength, Major Marquand held himself erect in his chair—contemplating the web that truth can weave.

THE END

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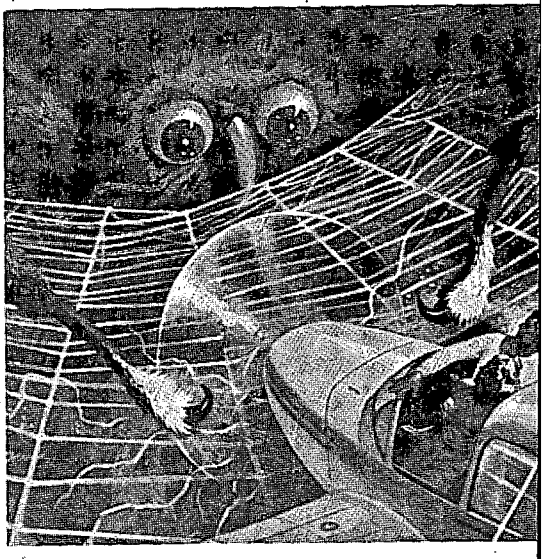

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